Information Sheet

COMPOSTING – Is it for me?

By Nathan Henderson, Householders' Options to Protect the Environment Inc.
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Composting has a place in just about all home waste systems. It is a dynamic product with many uses in the garden and benefits gained by the on-site cycling of organic materials.

At home benefits include:-

- Reducing kerb side rubbish (up to one third of household rubbish can be composted).
- Save money on fertilizers, soil conditioners, pH regulators, mulches, tip fees, potting mixes (1/3 sand, coir and compost).

It all adds up. It's great in the garden as it improves soil structure, increases soils ability to hold water, adds nutrients and micro-organisms which help make materials available as food to the plant (they are the essential ingredient often lacking in commercial fertilizers).

Materials to use are a balanced mix of carbon and nitrogen based ingredients. Nitrogen ingredients are things like vegetable scraps, animal manures and lawn clippings they generally have more moisture and rich colour to them. Carbon based materials are dry and have generally lost there colour they may be straw, shredded paper, dried and weathered leaves and grass clippings, sawdust etc. Materials that should be left out include plastic, metal, glass as these take a very long time to break down, weed seeds, diseased plant material, omnivorous/carnivorous animal manures, toilet wastes (needs special precautions), chemical substances, treated wood shavings, oils and strongly acidic garden wastes take longer to breakdown.

Some simple tests which may help in finding problems are:-

Moisture test; take a handful of compost give it a squeeze, you should only get a drop or two. If the compost is too dry lightly water to bring it up to the correct moisture or add drier materials if too wet.

A simple maturity test is to fill a few pots with compost and seed something like radishes or pumpkins if more than 2/3 sprout and continue to be healthy the compost should be mature. The smell should be earthy similar to a rainforest floor.

How to kick it off
Get started by organising a scrap bucket (any 2L + ice-cream bucket will do) and choose your composting site which will depend on the system you choose. Vermi-composting systems need a cool shaded area, the other two described can be seated in a sunny position (open bottom composters should be in an area away from invasive tree roots).

(continued overleaf)

Choose the System That Best Fits Your Needs

High yield, needs a little more time to put in.

Aerobic composting

Aerobic composting uses oxygen to help decompose matter. This is faster than the anaerobic method

These composters can all be bought from most hardware and gardening stores aswell as local councils and private retailers.
Aerobic composters can be made from an old 200L drum or similar make some air/drainage holes, use a lid. Simply add your ingredients and turn or roll the bin 1-2-3 times a week. Once the bin is about ¾ or so full you may wish to stop adding wastes and just continue to turn it until it has matured.

Lower yield uses less time but similar amount of waste.

Anaerobic

The anaerobic method is static, not being turned it is slower than the other two

As mentioned above this method does not use turning but if possible it will greatly speed up the process and is advised at least a couple of times. These composters are most simple to make but can be bought to. You can use an open bottomed 200L drum again with air holes, or make a 3 sided wooden box you may wish to add a 4th side as a door so you are able to step inside. Or alternatively you may just wish to have a heap on the ground, heaps larger than 1m work best and should be covered with something like old carpet/blanket, black plastic or a thick layer of straw this holds in heat and helps to keep pests out too.

Multiple yields, needs a few extra materials.

Vermi-composting

Uses red and tiger worms, you can also harvest "worm juice" as liquid fertilizer use 1:20 parts water and worms

Vermi-composting is great in that it can be done closer to the kitchen even in the kitchen if you use a suitable container. Worm farms can be made from various things wooden boxes, old bathtubs, troughs. Polystyrene boxes are great as you can have one and once it has been filled and the worms have finished their work you put another box (same size) on top with a little soil from the first and some worm food to go with it, the worms should migrate to the second box. Once this is done you can use the castings. To harvest the "worm juice" you can put a sloping piece of corrugated iron under the box and use polypipe like guttering to drain runoff into a bucket.

Toowoomba

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