

## Composting cheatsheet

If you're new to composting, find the process a little intimidating, or you've been trying but you're just not sure that it's working how it is meant to, this step-by-step cheatsheet will outline what you need to do to get your compost cranking!

### Step 1: Position your bin

Position your compost bin in a warm, sunny spot (but out of direct afternoon sun if you live in a hot climate like Perth).

When choosing a location, consider proximity to the kitchen door, and visibility at night. Putting your compost bin behind the shed at the bottom of the garden might mean you never use it! A well managed compost bin doesn't smell, so don't be afraid to keep it close to the house.

### Step 2: Set up your bin

If you choose an open-bottomed bin, dig into the ground at least 10cm deep if possible. (If not possible, these bins can be placed on paving: *consider placing over mouse mesh to avoid pests.*) *If you've chosen a contained (rotary) compost bin, simply place in your chosen position.*

Next, add a layer of coarse brown/dry material (carbon): twigs and sticks, shredded

cardboard, dry leaves, egg cartons, toilet rolls. This will allow air to flow through the heap. Add enough dry material to create a thickness of 8-12 cm (the width of one handspan).

Turbo charge your bin: add a handful of fresh compost, a handful of vermicomposting worms and/or a handful of good soil to the mix to inoculate the bin with good bacteria and critters.

Now your bin is ready to receive kitchen scraps.

### Step 3: Composting your food scraps

All organic matter contains both carbon and nitrogen, but to different extents. Materials high in carbon are often called "brown" because they are dry; materials high in nitrogen are often called "green" because they are fresh, moist and often green. More carbon and the compost will decompose more slowly; more nitrogen and the compost will begin to smell.

It's not necessary to get bogged down in the science, but it is important to know that food scraps, green grass clippings, vegetable peels and manures are nitrogen rich. The most common mistake people make with home

composting is adding too much nitrogen-rich material and not enough carbon-rich material. The result? Stinky compost bins.

To maintain a fresh-smelling compost bin, dry carbon rich materials should be added to the compost bin alongside nitrogen-rich materials.

Keeping a sack of dry leaves, box of sticks or a bale of hay next to the compost bin is an easy way to keep the carbon-nitrogen ratios in check. Alternatively, add small amounts of shredded paper or shredded cardboard.

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### Step 4: Turn your compost

Turning compost is essential to get oxygen through the pile, reduce smells and break down material more quickly. Turning every 1–2 weeks is recommended. Turning more frequently than this may dissipate the heat that has built up and slow down the process. For easy turning, a compost fork is recommended. These corkscrew devices allow Dalek-shaped compost bin contents to be turned easily without too much effort and no digging!

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### Step 5: Using your compost (and knowing when it is ready)

Home compost does not look like homogenous store-bought compost, so don't panic. There will still be sticks, egg shells, sweetcorn cobs, avocado and stone fruit pits, and larger materials in the compost. You will expect to see lots of worms in a healthy compost bin, too. You should not see fresh green produce in the bin. If it looks like soil, and smells earthy, then it is good to go, and can be dug into the garden, and used for pot plants.

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### Remember these four principles (ADAM) to make good compost:

#### **Aliveness:**

Composting is a living system, needing living organisms to break down the waste. That means food, oxygen and water. As well as bacteria there will be worms, insects and other critters living in your compost bin. Don't be put off by this: they all have a role to play.

#### **Diversity:**

To make good compost you need a diversity of ingredients, both green (nitrogen) and brown (carbon). These add different nutrients and minerals to the mix, and have different properties – for example, adding structure. Layering of ingredients increases diversity throughout the mix.

#### **Aeration:**

Oxygen encourages aerobic bacteria, which are the good ones! An aerated compost bin does not smell. Turning compost will add air, as will coarse materials such as sticks and egg cartons.

#### **Moisture:**

A moist environment encourages the beneficial insects that break down organic matter into compost. Compost should be damp, but not dripping with water (too much water can make it anaerobic). When adding lots of dry matter, watering from above is recommended. When adding lots of wet (green) matter, adding dry matter will help absorb the excess moisture.

### Telling your nitrogen from your carbon

If you're a beginner, the table to the right will help you identify what is considered "green" and what is considered "brown". If you'd like to know and understand a little more, there's also some information about the carbon and nitrogen ratios, or C:N ratios.

The fastest way to produce sweet-smelling compost is to aim for a ratio of C:N that is 25:1. That means 25 parts carbon for 1 part nitrogen. All material contains both carbon and nitrogen. Anything with a C:N ratio higher than 30:1 is considered carbon rich; anything lower is nitrogen rich.

But you don't need to understand C:N ratios to be able to compost. In simple terms, to achieve a good balance and a 25:1 ratio, you need to add two or three handfuls of "brown" for every one handful of "green".

#### Green / Wet / Nitrogen Rich

Soil (humus)	10:1
Manure	15:1
Grass clippings	17:1
Food scraps	17:1
Weeds	20:1
Seaweed	20:1
Coffee grounds	25:1

#### Brown / Dry / Carbon Rich

Twigs	700:1
Sawdust	500:1
Shredded cardboard	350:1
Newspaper	175:1
Straw	75:1
Dry leaves	60:1
Peanut shells	35:1

### Troubleshooting: Common composting problems

Here's a quick summary of common composting problems and how to deal with them:

**Too dry** (looks dry, is dry to touch, ants are in the compost bin): add moisture.

**Too wet** (contents are sodden): turn compost, and add dry carbon materials such as cardboard, paper or dry leaves.

**Vermin:** ensure bin is dug into the ground, consider using mouse mesh at the base.

**Flies:** Turn compost and cover top with a layer of soil.

**Smelly:** Turn compost, add dry ingredients such as cardboard, paper or dry leaves.

**Not doing anything:** ensure contents are moist, ensure there is enough nitrogen-rich (green) material, add a few handfuls of fresh compost, manure or composting worms to give it a boost.

### Do's and don'ts: what you can and cannot compost:

**Yes:** All fruit, vegetables, peels, stones, cotton, tissues, vacuum cleaner dust, feathers, fur, hair, leftovers

**No:** Dog, cat or human faeces; meat and fish scraps; large amounts of dairy and fats; chemicals