



Composting

CHRONICLE

Spring/Summer 2013



What's inside?

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DON'T
forget
to compost
your chronicle

Welcome to the spring/summer Composting Chronicle. This is the first edition of a new format which includes composting tips and ideas for the next seasons.

Spring and summer are always really busy seasons in the garden and compost is always useful for planting this year's vegetables and flowers. There is an abundance of excellent composting material available throughout the upcoming months to help replenish your bins & heaps so learning how to use grass clippings and spent plants is important for any keen composter.

To help you make the most of spring and summer this edition of the chronicle includes a composting calendar with key jobs to carry out. There's also information about food waste and some unusual things you can compost. We also give you some ideas about how to make the most of the most abundant composting material – grass clippings.

We would also like to thank those members who opted to receive future editions of the chronicle by email and encourage others to do the same by emailing recycle@leics.gov.uk

As always if you have any questions or would like to suggest an article for the autumn/winter composting chronicle send them in to recycle@leics.gov.uk

Thanks to all the Master Composters who have written articles for this edition.

How to start composting

“You can start composting at any time of the year; there is really not a moment to lose if you have the urge to get started on working with nature to cut waste. However, warmer weather is easier and spring is ideal”.

There are a few things to consider before you start composting:

Find the right compost bin for you

Choose your composter to suit your garden and lifestyle. There is masses of information on the web and from Master Composters - a good starting point is www.leics.gov.uk/compost_pages and you can contact a Master Composter via wasteprevention@leics.gov.uk

Pick the location with care

Think about a sunny location for most composters, especially in winter, and access for taking kitchen waste two or three times a week (so maybe near a path) but not too close to the house. Smells shouldn't be a problem but you don't want it under the kitchen window. Try to see the composter as a thing of beauty for what it does and don't hide it behind the shed.

Prepare the ground

Fork the soil well before siting the composter to help the creepy crawlies find it. A bucket of compost from an active heap is the best thing to jump-start your new bin.

Help is always available

If you have any problems with your compost bin contact a Master Composter who will be happy to help on wasteprevention@leics.gov.uk



Making the most of your grass clippings

During spring and summer all lawns tend to grow frantically and produce an abundance of grass clippings, which, if used correctly can be great for composting. Grass clippings are the definitive “greens” - low carbon, high nitrogen, fast decaying and with no structure.

Three ways to make good use of your grass clippings are:

- composting
- mulching
- grassboarding

Composting grass clippings

Here are some top tips to avoid problems composting grass clippings:

- spread the clippings out and let them dry for a few days before you use them
- add thin layers of clippings and mix them with a high carbon material such as shredded paper, straw or brown corrugated cardboard, torn into small pieces
- keep an eye on the heap and if it starts to smell stir it up with a compost aerator or a fork

Mulching with grass clippings

Mulching is the spreading of material (usually organic) onto bare soil or around a plant. It helps to suppress weeds, conserve moisture and in some cases, such as grass clippings, slowly feed the soil. Keep the layers thin – at most an



inch of clippings at a time – to make sure water and air are still getting through to your plants.

Grassboarding

Spread the grass fairly thinly in your compost bin (roughly just an inch or two deep in each layer) and add cardboard between each layer. The compost produced is completely homogenous and weed-free. The cardboard also stops the clippings getting soggy as it breaks down.

An example of this technique can be seen at the Compost Demonstration Site at Snibston Discovery Museum.

Be aware

There are at least two long lived herbicides that do not fully break down in the composting process - clopyralid and picloram - these are sold under a number of trade names. For more information, go to www.gardenorganic.org.uk/organicgardening/herbicide_damage.php

Do not mulch or incorporate into the soil grass clippings that have been treated with any herbicides. This includes weed and feed combinations. There is a good chance the herbicide will be active and damage the plants you are mulching.

Spring and Summer Composting Calendar

May

Unpack your maturing bin

If you've got a maturing bin, now is the time to empty it. Typically this is a bin that was filled in the autumn with nearly mature compost that was not quite ready but which is now good for mulching, digging in, filling planters and potting.

As soon as there's a really nice day and the frosts have gone, spread out a tarpaulin and unpack it to see what you've got (the birds will go mad stealing your worms at this point). Sieve the compost and put anything that's still not ready back in an active bin or heap and the rest should be ready to use. Any left over will be good for starting a new bin.

Reposition your bins

This is the ideal time, while you have got bins empty, to reposition them if possible. You might want to move

June

Start adding moisture

Hot weather is a pleasant change but keep your compost moist like a well rung sponge to keep all the micro-organisms alive and well. Always wear gloves when handling compost and wash your hands well afterwards.

them from full sun to partial shade for the summer and in doing so, make available the very fertile soil where they stood. It's also a good time to repair wooden bins. Fork new positions well and restart composters with immature stuff from the old heap. This will contain millions of bacteria, fungal spores, mini-beasts and eggs to get things going.

Turn your main heap

Turning the main compost heap is always satisfying and interesting. It will take various forms depending on whether you have single or multiple bins or bays. Again the aim is to make use of any mature compost. Aerate anything that is not ready and create vital space for the compost that is about to become available once the gardening season starts.

Get ready for the summer grass clippings

As summer starts the grass clippings will be abundant so make sure you have a supply of brown materials you can put in your compost bin to keep the mix correct - materials such as paper and card are perfect for the job.

July & August

Weeds

All through the summer, the weeds will be coming thick and fast. You can add annual weeds like groundsel, chickweed and bitter cress to your compost bin before they flower, so there is no risk of having their seed in the compost. The roots of perennial weeds like ground elder, couch grass, nettles, creeping buttercup, dandelions and docks can be composted if you drown them first. Place them in a bucket, weigh them down with a stone or slab and cover with water. Place a lid on the bucket and leave for several weeks. You can then drain off the liquid and pour it on to your compost heap, along with the drowned roots.

Clearing ponds

This is a good time of year to remove algae and thin deep water and overgrown marginal plants. Reduce pond weed by 30-50% removing by hand or with a rake.

Always leave any foliage or debris you have removed in a pile beside the pond for a few days to allow any pond creatures to return to the water. It can then be placed on the compost heap. Also cover the pond's surface with mesh in autumn, and keep in place until all leaves have fallen.

September

Add some leaves

September sees the beginning of autumn and the annual ritual of adding fallen leaves to your compost and leaf mould bins. So this job doesn't get too daunting, start early so the leaves are only collected in manageable piles. Mowing leaves is a great way to speed up the process.

Spent vegetables and plants

As the colder weather begins to set in the vegetable plants which have brought so much food this year are dying back and are ready for the compost bin to help out next year's growth. So collect up and put any spent plants into your compost bin. Woody prunings can also be added in to your composting mix for next year.

*My tomatoes are nearly all ripened and I have several pots with used compost and the plant residues. Can I put these on the compost heap - soil and plants - or is there a risk of disease?
Thank you for your help.
Pat Fitton*



the waste). They break down well and the old compost just adds body to the heap.

Anne & Tony Croft

I knock as much soil off as possible before adding to the compost bin and scatter it somewhere you are not intending to grow tomatoes or relatives - perhaps under shrubs. This is because soil in compost heaps just occupies space and excludes air.

David Cannon

It is better not to compost the fruit because the seeds have a great ability to survive the composting process. If there is any sign of blight don't compost the fruit because if the seeds survive the composting process they will produce diseased plants.

This also applies to potatoes. It is fine to compost the plant residues and the tomato compost, though I would spread this out over the soil or use as a lawn improver.

Tony Curtis

There is very little risk of disease from composting tomato plants unless they had blight. I always put the plant residue in the compost heap and the used soil goes into the runner bean or the sweet pea trench as it is very rich in nutrients.

If you did have any blight on your tomatoes then you do not want any of the plant residue anywhere near your garden - burn it or put it in a council green waste bin.

Peter Shepherd

I always put my tomato plants in the compost heap, the soil residue can go on the garden, (or in compost, but better on the garden). If there has been disease from blight no fruit should go in the compost as the disease is carried in the seeds.

Jane Woolmer

It's OK to put everything on the compost heap as long as they are not diseased - I do! It will rot down more quickly if you can (a) crumble the compost off the roots into the bin with your fingers and (b) chop up the stems and root ball into roughly 3"-4" pieces and add them to the bin.

Lynn Dutton

Food and some unusual things that can be composted

By David Cannon
Master Composter

"My rule of thumb is, if it started life as a plant, it's ok. Eggshells scrunched up and torn teabags can be usefully added to that.

The general advice is to avoid processed and cooked food as these tend to attract vermin. I have to admit to minor offences here but usually I use the Green Cone food waste digester for these sorts of foods. I also use the Green Cone for all onion family and all citrus. You can put them in the composter but they do slow things down a bit. Green Cones and garden composters work very well as a complementary team.

The challenge is usually to balance the greens (which include most kitchen waste) with browns (higher carbon, more structured,

slower decaying materials). Coming to the rescue are various materials of plant origin such as toilet and kitchen roll cores, shredded paper, tissues and best of all, brown corrugated cardboard ripped up as small as you can be bothered. Mix it in with the "green" stuff for a well-balanced and happy heap.

Small amounts of wool or cotton, hair (human or pet), vacuum cleaner dust, wood ash and lumpwood charcoal from a barbecue are all fine to add - but avoid briquettes and always mix the last two with water to ensure there are no burning embers".



