

Sustainable Gardening: Using Compost

COMPOST BLENDS AND MIXES

Compost can be blended with a range of materials to make it more suitable for a specific gardening use. A range of products can be easily made with home produced compost, or purchased as pre-blended products from nurseries or landscape suppliers.



If you intend making your own compost blended products at home, be sure to use gloves and wear a particle mask to avoid breathing in dust.



Potting mix

Potting mixes contain compost and inorganic material to assist in drainage and aeration. Compost is not usually used at a rate of more than 40% by volume in the mix, as it breaks down and can result

in slumping or shrinkage in the pot. Add inorganic materials such as sand, vermiculite or gravel to the mix to keep it free draining and aerated. Starter fertiliser may be needed depending on the nutrient content of your mix and plant requirements.

Commercial potting mixes are available that contain compost. Look for potting mixes that are certified to Australian Standard AS 3743 (2003) to ensure you are buying a quality mix that will support the growth of your plants.

Topdressing

To make topdressing from your home-made compost, screen out the coarse particles with an 8 or 10 millimetre garden sieve that can be purchased from hardware stores. Blend the fine compost with a small proportion of sand (approx 20%) to make it easier to spread and rake into your lawn.

Garden soils

Use compost blends when building new garden beds if soil quality is poor or limited soil is available on-site. Compost made at home can be blended with soil on-site or with purchased sand. You may need to use some slow release fertiliser to help plants establish in the garden bed. Commercial garden soils are available which contain compost. Look for soils that are certified to Australian Standard AS 4419 (2003) to ensure you are buying quality soil that will support the growth of your plants.

Worm castings in a mix

Worm castings are a nutrient-rich organic material produced from the action of earthworms in home worm farms. Add them as a small component to potting mixes, soils and topdressing (usually less than 10% by volume). Worm farms also produce a watery liquid often referred to as 'worm juice' or 'leachate'. It is mainly water released during the breakdown of organic wastes in worm farms and contains a range of soluble nutrients that can feed plants. Dilute worm juice with clean water at a ratio of 1:10 and apply directly to the soil surrounding the plant.



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WHAT IS COMPOST?

Compost is an organic fertiliser resulting from the controlled breakdown of organic matter. It can be made at home in a compost bin from garden trimmings and food scraps, or bought from garden centres and landscape suppliers.

WHY USE COMPOST?

Better for you

The flavour and nutrient content of fruits and vegetables is greatly improved when they are grown in good quality compost.



Nutrients for plants

Compost is an excellent source of essential plant nutrients. In particular, it provides those nutrients needed by plants in smaller amounts - such as manganese, zinc and iron - that are often missing from artificial fertilisers. Compost also increases the capacity of soil to retain nutrients, reducing the need for fertilisers. This also reduces nutrient runoff into waterways and leaching into groundwater which can cause problems such as algal blooms. Compost can help provide a more neutral pH and improve the availability of nutrients for plant growth in soils.

Save money

Compost saves you money by reducing the need for water and fertiliser on your garden.

Save water

In some soils a 5% increase in organic material can quadruple a soil's water holding capacity! Compost also reduces water loss through evaporation by up to 70%.



Improves physical properties of soils

Compost cuts down soil erosion and promotes healthy plant root growth.

In clay or silty soils, adding organic matter opens up tightly packed particles.

Compost helps to bind clusters of soil particles, called aggregates, and helps to develop tiny air channels and pores into which roots can grow.

Improves soil health

Compost is a living material that contains a range of microbes that can improve the health of soils and the vitality of plants. Organic matter present in compost also supports the growth of beneficial bacteria, fungi, insects and worms that all play an important role in aerating the soil and suppressing plant disease. Good quality compost can suppress specific plant diseases, such as club root and white rot, that can occur in unhealthy soils. Regular use of compost can reduce the need for chemical pesticides, making your garden more sustainable.



USING COMPOST IN YOUR GARDEN

Vegetable gardens

Using compost in vegetable gardens will improve the organic matter content and fertility of soil. Compost can be surface spread and dug into the garden bed a couple of weeks prior to planting.

Mulching

Mulching of the soil surface helps combat weeds, conserves water and makes your garden look great! Coarse, semi-decayed woody material is a suitable mulch to add on top of the soil and around plants. It can be used around trees and shrubs. Ensure the mulch does not touch the stems of plants. This avoids excess moisture retention which promotes disease such as collar rot.

Topdressing

Topdressing with compost on new and established lawns helps to replace organic matter and nutrients lost through mowing. Home-produced compost is ideal for this purpose as its slow nutrient release helps to stimulate growth. Adding compost also means your lawn will hold moisture more readily and will need less watering. Topdressing with a 5-10 millimetre layer in spring and autumn is ideal.



Soil conditioning

Use compost to enrich your garden soil before planting. Compost is good for digging into the soil a couple of weeks before planting.



Seed starter and potting mixes

You can use your home produced compost for preparing your own potting mixes.