How to make a compost bin

DIY compost bins can be made using a wide range of materials, but it’s important to get the design details just right. We show you how.

Making your own compost can be a rewarding way to dispose of suitable garden and household waste, and making your own compost can make the whole experience even better! A compost bin can be made of any durable and rigid material, but it must be a good insulator and, to aid the composting process, the bin’s design should allow in air and moisture. If you’re going to make a compost bin, rather than buy, we suggest you use the cheapest materials available; unless its looks are important.

The materials you choose to build your bin with, as well as its size, shape and design details, will affect how efficiently it makes compost, so it’s important to get all of these aspects right.

Which? advice
See the Which? Gardening factsheet 'How to make good compost' for our guide to making great compost.

Getting started
Decide which material you’re going to use to build your compost bin, and its size (it should be a minimum of 1 cubic m). Then put together three permanent sides, the fourth should be removable (see overleaf).

Choosing materials
When it comes to materials, wood is the obvious choice, as it’s particularly easy to work with. We recommend using recycled timber, such as old garden stakes, planks or even wooden pallets.

Other materials to consider include: bricks or breeze blocks, chicken wire — make two ‘skins’ and, for insulation, fill the space between them with newspaper; and corrugated iron or plastic — stout, well-anchored posts are essential.

Shape and size
Many of the plastic bins sold for making compost are round. But, when making your own, it’s easier to build a straight-sided bin. (Square bins have a larger surface area than round ones, but a similar capacity.)

If a bin is too small, the materials will turn into compost slowly. Basically, the bigger the compost bin, the better. The smallest size that will work well is a compost bin of about 1 cubic m. If you need a larger bin, consider building a double or triple version (see overleaf).

Wooden slats: hammer the slats, leaving gaps for ventilation between each one, to four corner posts

Bricks or breeze blocks: for ventilation, remove some of the bricks at the base of this compost bin.

Chicken wire and newspaper: make two ‘skins’ of wire and stuff with newspaper for insulation

Corrugated iron or plastic: support these walls between sturdy, deeply set posts.

Double and triple compost bins
A double bin is useful because it makes turning the compost heap much easier: you simply fork it from one compartment to the other, mixing and aerating it. Another way of using a double bin is to fill one half while the other is maturing.

You could build a triple bin, if you have the space and enough garden waste to fill the bins. While one section is being filled, a second can be maturing and a third be ready for use on the garden.

Air is essential for efficient composting. The best way of aerating compost is to make your bin open at its base, so, whatever material you’ve chosen to build with, leave gaps at the bottom to allow excess moisture to drain away. Alternatively, start the heap with a layer of twigs or coarse material to aid drainage.

Consider ease-of-use. Give your bin a removable side (see diagram, below), to make it easy to turn your compost while it’s rotting (in order to increase aeration) and to get your well-rotted compost out to use on your garden.

A cover or lid to keep out the rain and, unless you’re prepared to water your heap in dry weather, to prevent moisture from escaping, too. A square of old carpet or sacking (see diagram, below) will help to retain moisture and heat.

Make a removable side
The one shown below is made with wooden slats, but you could also use a sheet of corrugated iron or sturdy plastic.

Make a cover or lid
Use a square of old carpet (below, left), a panel of wood or corrugated iron weighed down with stones (below, right).

Sitting your compost bin
■ Contact with free-draining soil is essential, some of the compost material should touch the soil or be close to it. This aids drainage, helps to stop the base of the compost from becoming sludgy and allows worms and insects in.
■ If your bin is open, put it in a shaded spot out of the wind if you can.
■ Move your compost bin each year. Place it where the soil is lacking in nutrients or where you want to put a special plant. The soil will benefit from the seepage of water and nutrients, and from the increased worm activity.

For more advice on making compost, see www.which.co.uk/makingcompost

For the full selection of Which? Gardening factsheets, see www.which.co.uk/wgfactsheets

February 2012