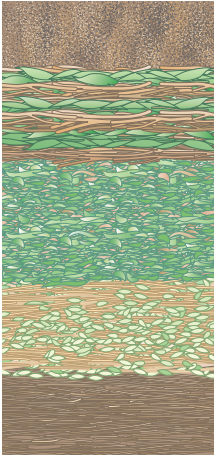


Building up the layers of compost



A layer of manure or compost accelerator will make the heap break down more quickly.

Grass cuttings or annual weeds should be placed in shallow layers, with layers of woodier material in between.

Each layer of material shouldn't be too deep, or too tightly packed; woody prunings should be shredded first.

A fibrous bottom layer such as hedge clippings or straw, will allow air to circulate.

Making the best compost

Most problems with compost bins can be easily avoided and are simple enough to fix. Some people swear by 'turning' the compost – taking it out, mixing it up and putting it back in again. In fact this shouldn't be necessary if it is layered properly in the first place. However, you might want to speed up the rotting process by using an activator. You can buy compost activators or apply a layer of garden soil, animal manure or a sprinkling of pelleted chicken manure every 30cm or so to speed up the rotting process.



What is a mulch?

A mulch is any material, organic or inorganic, that is spread on the surface of the soil to seal in moisture and suppress weeds. Organic mulches include chipped bark, garden compost and wood chips. Organic mulches eventually rot down so are also good for conditioning the soil, but this does mean you have to top them up from time to time. Inorganic mulches include gravel, slate chips and recycled glass, which all work particularly well in modern garden designs.

Ideal for the job



Shredder

Forget chopping – the fastest way to get rid of bulky garden waste is to use a shredder. Hedge clippings, twigs and even small branches can be added to your compost bin once cut down to size.



How to... CHOOSE SOIL IMPROVERS AND MAKE GARDEN COMPOST

TOOLS

- compost bin
- shredder
- spade
- garden fork

MATERIALS

- garden waste
- organic matter such as paper, cardboard and raw vegetable trimmings
- compost activator
- bagged farmyard manure or pelleted manure
- soil improver

you can do it

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Every effort has been made to ensure that the instructions given in this leaflet are accurate and will enable you to do the job safely and successfully. Please follow instructions carefully and seek expert advice in the event of difficulty.

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The name 'compost' refers to any bulky, organic decayed matter. Various types of compost (including garden compost) can be used as soil improvers. But they are not to be confused with potting composts which are specially formulated and enriched to make them suitable as a growing medium for plants.

Enriching, mulching and fertilising the soil are essential for any long-term success in the garden. They will all help to improve the condition of your soil, and will work wonders for the health and well-being of your plants.

What is a soil improver?

A soil improver enhances soil structure, helps retain moisture and encourages beneficial organisms such as earthworms, whose activities help plants grow strong and healthy. It's also filled with the nutrients plants love. It is not used 'neat' for growing anything in, but as a soil conditioner, and should be worked into the soil before planting. Afterwards it can be added annually – spread it on the surface of the soil between the plants and work it into the top few centimetres of earth with a garden fork.

Soil improver works by adding humus to the soil – dead and decayed organic matter that is vital for healthy plant growth. Organic mulches do the same as they rot down.

Choosing soil improvers

Soil improvers will help you get the most out of your soil, but with so many choices out there, how do you decide which one to go for? Well-rotted garden compost is certainly the cheapest option and also one of the best, but it's possible to buy soil improvers ready-made. Knowing a bit about the different kinds of product available will help you decide what's right for you and your garden.



Types of soil improver

Garden compost

Well-rotted, home-made garden compost is the favourite option of most gardeners. It is an excellent and wallet-friendly soil conditioner, as it is rich in nutrients and costs nothing to make.



Manure

If bought fresh, animal manure needs to be stacked for six months so it has time to rot down before being used in the garden. For convenience, ready-to-use farm manure can be bought by the bag. Pelleted manure is clean and easy to use – just sprinkle on the surface of the soil and fork in.

Leafmould

Dark, crumbly leafmould is made from leaves that have been left to rot for at least a year. An excellent compost, but one you will have to make for yourself from collected leaves.



Composted bark

The next best thing to leafmould is composted bark, which can be bought by the bag.

Peat

There are no nutrients in peat, so it should be avoided in favour of other soil improvers. Extracting peat from wetlands also has a detrimental impact on the environment.

Peat-free alternatives

Soil improvers made from a mixture of composted green waste and composted bark are highly beneficial to the soil and have a long lasting effect on the soil structure.

Spent mushroom compost

Spent mushroom compost contains bits of chalk, which is alkaline. It should not be used for acid beds or lime-hating plants, but can be a useful soil conditioner for most other soil and plant types.

Making your own compost

A compost bin isn't just the easiest and cheapest way of disposing of garden waste; it also produces the best possible soil conditioner. Garden compost can be made from any organic matter that will rot down. As well as plant material, you can compost paper, cardboard, raw vegetable trimmings and natural fibres such as cotton.

WHAT TO INCLUDE	WHAT TO LEAVE OUT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> uncooked kitchen waste: vegetable trimmings, tea bags, coffee grounds and eggshells annual weeds (before seedheads form) spent bedding plants and flowers soft hedge clippings soft prunings lawn clippings shredded natural fibre materials such as newspapers, paper, cotton and wool fabrics shredded woody stems cardboard, sawdust and straw 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> cooked kitchen waste animal products and bones bread diseased plant materials soil pests weed seedheads synthetic fabrics non-biodegradable materials dog or cat waste unshredded woody material perennial weeds

What can compost do for your soil?

Garden compost not only contains many enriching nutrients, but its bulky organic quality improves the structure of the soil, increasing water-retention in a dry, chalky or sandy soil, and aiding drainage in a heavy peat or clay one.

