Sustainable Living Information

Composting

Advantages of Composting

- Improves soil fertility, soil structure and water holding capacity
- Reduces the amount of waste in landfills
- Compost can be used instead of potting mix for pot plants, added round plants in the garden or spread thinly on top of garden beds.

Compost Bins and Heaps

A variety of compost bins are available for sale but bins can also be made fairly cheaply using bricks, timber or corrugated iron, or an old bath or similar container.

A drum bin mounted on a frame with a turning handle helps to keep the compost aerated, but these are more expensive to buy (and difficult to make).

Principles of Composting

Composting requires air, moisture and warmth as well as organic waste.

Green moist waste (high in nitrogen) should be balanced with dry fibrous material (high in carbon).

Green material – kitchen scraps, grass clippings, leafy weeds, horse or chook manure etc.

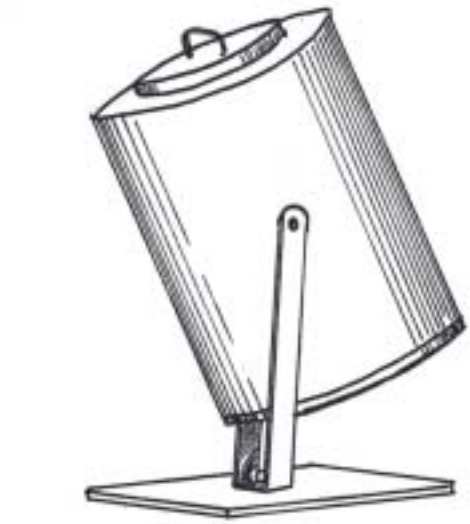
Dry material – sawdust, dry leaves, woody weeds, shredded newspaper and cardboard, wood ash, straw etc.

Aeration – turn the pile now and then if possible or use worms. Worms help to break down the organic matter and keep it aerated. If the pile becomes too hot, they simply move to the soil below.

Moisture – add water whenever the pile looks dry. If the compost becomes smelly,

it is too wet – add more dry material or dirt.

Compost is ready when it looks and smells like soil. This can take up to six months. Start a new pile when the first one is full.



ROTATING COMPOST BIN

Excluding Pests

Flies – tiny composting flies are a normal part of the composting process, but other flies can be kept to a minimum by covering green smelly waste with a layer of soil or sawdust. Don't add meat or bones.

Rats – a 12mm wire mesh placed between the compost bin and the soil will allow worms to migrate up and down but exclude rats and mice.

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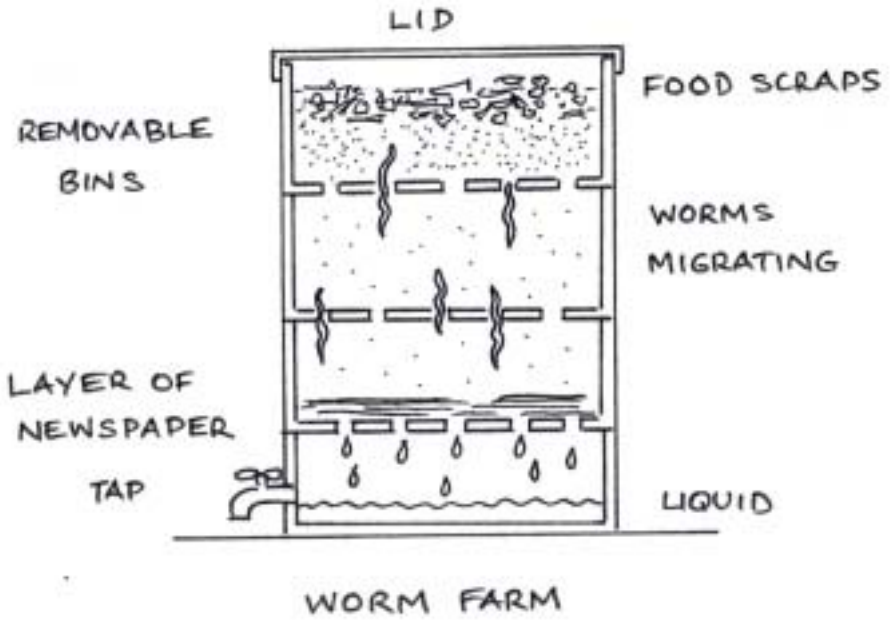
Worm Farms

Another way to deal with kitchen waste is to feed it to worms in a worm farm. The great advantage of worm farms is that they don't need much space so can be kept on a back porch or on a balcony if there is no garden.

Worm farms can be bought from garden suppliers or made from three polystyrene fruit boxes stacked on top of each other. Tiger worms are the preferred species.

To collect the nutrient-rich liquid produced, the bottom box must have a solid base – no holes in the bottom. (Commercial worm farms come with a tap to drain the liquid from the bottom bin.)



The second box must have holes in the bottom and should be lined with a layer of newspaper and soil before the food scraps and worms are introduced. A layer of sacking or newspaper over the top of the worms will help to keep them happy, as they don't like light.

Vegetable peelings (no onions or citrus), tea bags, coffee grinds, shredded paper products, hair, and eggshells are some of the items that can be given to the worms. Small amounts added periodically are best.

Make sure the worms are also kept moist and shaded as they will die if they dry out.

When the second bin is full, add the third bin, also with holes in the bottom, and the worms will migrate upwards to the new food source.

When all the food scraps in the second bin have been turned into worm castings, that layer can be removed and the nutrient-rich soil used as potting mix or spread about the garden.

When the third bin is full, replace it with the emptied bin.

A brick or large rock placed in the bottom bin will save worms from drowning if they accidentally fall through the holes in the second bin. By slithering out of the liquid onto the rock they should be able to climb back into the second box.

The liquid in the bottom box can be diluted with water and used as a liquid fertiliser.

Further Information

For more information visit the Sustainable Living Tasmania Environment Resource Library.

Visit: http://www.howtocompost.org

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