

Getting the right mix

TOO GREEN! This is a classic mistake made by many first time composters. They get their brand new compost bin and just use it to get rid of their grass cuttings, fruit and vegetable peelings. These are great things to put in a bin, but on their own you will end up with a sludgy, smelly mess.



1 First day – only grass cuttings and peelings are visible.



2 After a couple of weeks – lots of fruit flies, looks like a green lump, smells rotten and the bin feels warm at this stage.



3 After a month – will just be a moist, lumpy mess and will have lost that vital heat that is needed for the composting process due to the lack of air.

Can I do anything about it? A bit of hard work is the remedy for sludge, use a fork to empty the bin and break up any solid clumps. Then refill the bin adding plenty of brown material and some fresh greens as you go. Be patient, as it will take a couple of months to look like it should do.

TOO BROWN! Autumn is a typical time of year when this may occur. Because of the large number of leaves falling from the trees and a flurry of plant pruning, bins get filled with too many leaves. Autumn leaves just don't produce enough nitrogen to activate the heat production.



1 First day – a heap of leaves, branches, straw and paper, very dry looking.



2 After a couple of weeks – looks much the same, no smell and just a few woodlice and ants.

That's like my bin, what can I do? Leaves should be composted separately to make lovely leafmould. If your bin does have more leaves in it than it should do, try adding some more greens like grass cuttings. Or you can add nettles soaked in cold water, which also makes a great activator for a dry compost bin.

AHH, JUST RIGHT! The 'green' items will contain bacteria that will generate the initial heat that is required by the process. A healthy compost bin is a living ecosystem. By keeping a good mix of green and brown material you will provide the perfect conditions for a variety of mini-beasts, and can let them do all of the hard work.



1 First day – green and brown items visible; egg shells, vegetable peelings, crunched up cardboard, grass cuttings, prunings etc.



2 After a couple of weeks – looking a bit moist, no smell, the level will keep dropping and air-pockets will be letting it breathe.



3 After a couple of months – clumps of green material are still visible, brown items still showing but starting to decompose. After six months – black and crumbly material, no smell, some woody brown material and egg shells still visible, some worms and bugs left.

Make sure you keep adding the right combination of greens and browns ... and you'll have a continuous supply of nutritious compost for your garden. Don't forget to aerate your compost once in a while by using a fork or a broom handle.