

Compost – Problem Solving.

WHY IS MY COMPOST WET OR SMELLY?

This is caused by an excess of wet materials, such as grass cuttings and green vegetables – this causes a wet mat to form which eliminates air and encourages anaerobic decomposition which smells. Mix in more dry material such as scrunched up paper, straw, leaves, twigs or torn up cardboard (egg boxes are good) which will add air and soak up some of the excess moisture.

MY COMPOST BIN HAS LOTS OF LITTLE FLIES, HOW CAN I GET RID OF THEM?

These flies are fruit flies and help the compost process. To reduce their numbers, bury any fruit and vegetable scraps under some garden material or wrap them in newspaper. You can also lay a piece of newspaper or cardboard over the top of the contents and place fruit underneath it when adding to the bin.

WHY IS MY COMPOST TOO DRY?

Add some greener material such as fruit and vegetable scraps or grass cuttings. Dry compost does not break down well. Try to keep a 50:50 mix of greens and browns. A small amount of water can be added if needed. Ants in the bin are a sign it may be too dry.

HOW CAN I PREVENT RATS?

The discovery of rats in your garden can cause considerable distress and compost heaps and bins are often blamed. However this is not the case. If there are rats in the locality they will simply take advantage of the shelter and food that a compost heap provides. If you find that you have a problem with rats there are several things that you can do to keep them out of your compost bin and prevent them from returning.

Don't add cooked food, especially meat and fish, or anything strong-smelling like cheese and fats to the bin as this will attract rats to your compost. Vegetable and fruit peelings, and general garden waste are fine.

You can deter rats by lining the base, sides and top of the bin with a heavy-duty metal mesh. The mesh holes should be less than 1.5 cm in diameter. Chicken wire is not suitable. The most effective mesh is the type used by builders to strengthen concrete.

Place thorny material around the base of the bin, you could also use your Christmas tree. This will help to deter rats.

The compost bin should have a tightly fitting lid that can be clamped on. Ensure the bin is set squarely so that there is no gap between the sides and the lid.

Rats are shy creatures and don't like disturbance. Put your compost bin in a busier area of the garden that you walk by often. Regular use of the compost is likely to cause too much disruption for a rat colony to develop.

Don't store items around your compost bin as this can provide a nice quiet area for rats.

Rats are attracted to food from the bird table, this can encourage them into your garden. Place a large paving slab below the feeder so that it's easier to brush up fallen seed.

Give these tips a try and hopefully your rodent neighbours won't interfere too much with your compost making.

WHAT DOES COMPOST LOOK LIKE?

Home compost will look 'rougher' than shop bought compost. You can sieve it before use if you wish and return the 'bits' back to the bin, but it isn't necessary as it works just as well once it's in the ground, by providing nutrients and structure.

DO I NEED TO ADD A COMPOST ACTIVATOR?

Activators can be bought from garden centres. They help speed up the composting process. However, if there is a good mix of materials, you shouldn't need an activator. Young nettle tops, grass cuttings and comfrey are all natural activators you can add if you like – just make sure they are mixed in well.