

As part of Woodside Plant Centre's **APPLE WEEK**



are running a series of free drop-in workshops on composting and apples.

Number 3

COMPOSTING IN A BAG

ASK Organic are pleased to launch a new and exciting way to compost kitchen scraps and make good use of spent compost. We have adapted a traditional old composting method, trench composting, to solve the problems many gardeners face. We call this brand new technique 'Composting in a Bag.'

COMPOSTING IN WINTER

The composting process slows down with the arrival of winter. Because of the low temperatures, the compost-making bacteria work more slowly, or not at all. This means that the compostables do not sink and your bin becomes too full. During the winter, we only have raw kitchen scraps to compost. This green, sappy material on its own becomes soggy and airless and may start to smell. Even mixing in crumpled paper or cardboard egg boxes doesn't make enough difference.

You could make more space in the compost bin by bagging up any good compost at the bottom of the bin, but the unpleasant smell won't go away.

The solution is to try 'Composting in a Bag.'

COMPOSTING IN A BAG

Gardeners often grow plants in containers and, by the end of autumn, nutrients in the compost have all been used up. It is possible to spread the compost round the garden, using it as soil conditioner or as a mulch, but you often don't have enough space in the garden for this and you need to get rid of the compost somehow. Or you don't have a garden at all. Sometimes it is possible, with the addition of some slow release fertiliser, to grow a non hungry crop like cut and come again salad in the old compost, but this simply delays the problem of how to dispose of it.

So mix raw kitchen scraps with spent commercial compost.

1. Use an empty plastic bag, possibly the one you bought your compost in.
2. Add in a layer of raw kitchen scraps, whatever you have available.
3. Sprinkle a small handful of compost activator over the fruit and vegetables. This introduces the bacteria that break down the scraps.
4. Cover this with a thick layer of spent commercial compost. Don't worry about rootballs. Break them up as best you can and the roots will gradually rot down with everything else.
5. Keep adding alternate layers of scraps and activator and compost till the bag is full.
6. Tie the bag firmly and leave for a few months in an out of the way, frost free place like a shed or sheltered corner.
7. This process adds nutrients and structure to the spent compost, so lets you use it again.
8. Mix this with new commercial or home made compost, 50:50.

The dry spent compost should soak up some of the surplus liquid from the kitchen scraps, so don't make holes in the bag for drainage. Apart from anything else, a leaky bag would make a nasty and smelly mess. Each addition of spent compost will absorb any remaining wetness.

Composting in a bag makes good use of kitchen scraps and spent commercial compost and saves you money.

TRENCH COMPOSTING

Composting in a Bag is a modification of the old-fashioned trench composting technique. If you have a vegetable plot you might also want to compost kitchen waste in the ground.

Dig a trench 2 spits deep, placing the soil to one side. Put raw kitchen scraps into the trench and cover with a layer of soil. You don't need to use compost activator as worms and soil bacteria will do the job perfectly well. The soil will also conceal any unpleasant smell.

Gardeners traditionally grew runner beans in the trench, knowing that these vegetables would benefit from the extra nutrients. They may not have known that beans also fix or add nitrogen to the soil. This replaces any nitrogen that might have been used during the composting process.

WORMERIES

Compost worms also process kitchen scraps, but they only work when the soil temperature is higher than 12°C and is ideally between 15 and 20°C. A wormery would need to be kept in a frost free outbuilding or even indoors, say in a cupboard or utility room, during the winter. An alternative is to build your own wormery in the garden. Make a small square wooden box, 60cm square, with a permeable membrane as a base to allow surplus liquid to escape and prevent the worms from doing so. If the temperature falls sharply during the winter, the worms will gather together in the warmest part of the worm box. [See www.askorganic.co.uk Worms and Wormeries for details on using a wormery.]

RAW KITCHEN SCRAPS IN A COMPOST BIN

If you are going to use your compost bin during the winter, first empty out and bag any finished compost to make extra space. Always mix in crumpled paper and soft card to absorb surplus liquid and create the air holes that aerobic bacteria need. Regularly sprinkle handfuls of topsoil over the compost to introduce bacteria.

This will work, but not as well as the other methods described here unless you are still adding in weeds, some leaves and shredded stalks and twigs from the garden. After the New Year this becomes increasingly difficult.

COMMERCIAL COMPOSTS

These composts vary in quality and you need to check you are buying a type suitable for the plants you want to grow. We recommend the New Horizons organic compost and Vital Earth ranges. These have performed very well in “Which Gardening” trials.

You should also check on the age of the bag you're buying. The composting process does continue in bags, so if they are not new, the compost mix may not be as good as you hope. Avoid buying bags that are heavy: the compost will be soggy and not as nutrient-rich.

At the end of the growing season, do not add used commercial compost to your compost bin. It adds no nutrients or soil bacteria and, because it can't decompose like other material, it will not generate heat, but will lower the overall temperature of your bin and slow down the composting process.

More Information

For more details on the subjects covered here, visit the ASK Organic website: [**www.askorganic.co.uk**](http://www.askorganic.co.uk)

In the Composting section, you will find articles on :-

Winter composting, Composting in the snow, and Worms and Wormeries.

You can also phone our composting helpline 01450860778.

Scottish Borders Council have kindly sponsored these special workshops and also sponsor the Home Composting pages in the ASK Organic website.



for queries about recycling call 01835 826 609