

GENERAL GARDENING

Composting Tricks



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The amount of green waste we produce from within the house and from the garden is quite amazing. Under normal circumstances, this green waste would end up in landfill sites, its nutrients and water-holding and soil-fertility benefits lost. And these elements are essential in developing a beautiful garden because the soil is the foundation to great growth and superior productivity.

So how do you use green waste to benefit your garden and ultimately your back pocket? Well, the most obvious way is employing the services of a composting system. The trouble is many people have tried with little success over the years, and much of this has to do with the technology employed.

Old-fashioned composting techniques usually involved rotting material down, which sometimes takes years. These systems utilise bins where you throw fresh organics on top and they gradually break down. In a forest, this may be a natural way, but in a typical domestic garden, it is not always the case. We have not only stripped years of top-soil development we garden, but we also have a more intensive expectation, demanding plants to



Trevor with his Aerobin

grow to maturity in a just a few years. This puts greater demand on the soil, when in most coastal cities (which is just about all) we suffer from a depleted nutritional base from the start. The rotting technique is better known as anaerobic composting, and tends to produce a greater volume of methane gas (possibly the worst greenhouse

gas). It does not enrich the soil in microbial activity, which is important because a healthy soil is a living soil. And the richer the diversity of microscopic life forms, the healthier the plants are.

Another composting option is the aerobic technique. This method doesn't require you to perform star jumps but, more importantly, requires the compost to be moving regularly, adding air into the mix, a critical component in the build-up of healthy populations of bacteria. In the 1970s, compost tumblers came out, and these required six to twelve rolls a day to provide the air-injected bacterial power to break the organic material down into rich humus. Unfortunately, these bins have lost popularity because of the laborious workload required to create the compost.

The latest technology takes us back to a bin format but uses a revolutionary design feature best described as a lung to inject the air into the mix. This system breaks the mix down in a period of nine to twelve weeks, depending on the mix of wet/dry (which is best to be 50/50) and the size of the particles in the blend. Temperature is also a determining factor, but because the bin is designed to seal in the ingredients, it has a self-perpetuating effect as the bacterial mass builds up, the energy expelled from the activity heats the bin. The thermal insulation in Aerobin

conserves this heat, which leads to rapid breakdown of waste. My first batch reached a staggering 75°C heat inside the bin, which also actually sterilises most harmful bacteria from the mix. The other benefit of a sealed bin is the fact you can keep the pests out. Rodents can feast in compost bins, but a sealed lid deters any chance of entry, and they simply move on instead of setting up home.

One other feature I find beneficial in the design of these new-generation bins sold everywhere as Aerobin is the leachate collection tray. This liquid is nutritional gold, and when mixed with water at a 50/50 rate, it can dramatically boost the growth of seedlings in veggie patches, which saves you buying liquid fertilisers. It also dramatically boosts the health of barren soil by boosting microbe populations so it's an absolute bonus. This liquid was once lost with the old-fashioned styled bins.

I currently use three types of compost bins and the new-age Aerobin is proving the most productive of all. The 400-litre capacity is ideal for a mid-sized to large garden and, when in full use, this bin breaks down the material by 20% a week, allowing you to add between 50–80% more green material whilst removing as much as 50 litres of rich humus a week from the base.