

1 & 2 Why Community Compost?

Welcome to Community Composting

Community Composting is where a community gets together to make compost. It is a very rewarding activity. Community composting make sense of valuable resources that are so often regarded as 'waste' or 'rubbish'.

Community Composting also helps local authorities fulfil their commitments to wiser use of resources under Local Agenda 21.

Local Agenda 21

At the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, the governments of the world committed themselves to caring for and using the earth's limited resources more fairly and wisely. This was called Agenda 21 : from this they realised that, in order for their commitment to become reality, they must work at the local level.

Local Agenda 21(LA21) is all about local people setting their own agenda for action, to help improve their own immediate area. LA21 provides the opportunity for all to make a positive contribution to their environment.

Community composting is a way of putting words into action . People are increasingly beginning to think about how they live their lives and how much waste they produce. Establishing Community Composting schemes will act as a catalyst to provide a global solution to a local problem.

Why make compost?

Twenty million tons of domestic rubbish is produced in the UK each year, and around 25 – 30 per cent of this consists of compostable kitchen scraps and garden clippings. There is a government target to recycle or compost 25 per cent of this valuable resource by the year 2000.

Composting reduces the amount of waste we throw away, using it to make a valuable soil improver for gardeners, growers and landscapers.

The benefits of making compost may be felt by individuals, by the community and in the natural environment. Dustbins smell much sweeter if the compostable waste is removed, and sorting the rest of the rubbish for recycling becomes a much more pleasant task.

Reduction in the amount of waste being sent to landfill has a number of advantages. Pollution from the sites is reduced, a smaller area of land is used up, and liability for landfill tax by waste disposal companies is lessened, lowering the overall cost of dealing with waste.

If compostable material can be put to good use then less will be burnt on garden bonfires and this in turn will help reduce smoke pollution. The likelihood of fly-tipping of garden residue is diminished if it can be made into a useful product instead.

Depending on its properties, the end product can become a soil improver, mulch, or potting mix ingredient. These recycled products can be used instead of peat, which is good news for threatened peatlands and their wildlife,

Where compost heaps are created they encourage a range of wildlife such as grass snakes and hedgehogs. Worms and beneficial creatures that make their home in the heaps can spread out from there into the surrounding soil, enhancing the natural recycling processes.

There are other fringe benefits from composting, such as the production of heat in the breakdown process. This can be used to heat a greenhouse or water piped through the heap.

Compost can be made in the back garden by individuals. Even in a flat or house with no garden, a worm bin can be set up to recycle kitchen scraps. When people get together, however, larger quantities of material can be composted for the benefit of the community as a whole.

Peatland conservation

Peat comes from fragile peatland habitats and to extract it peat bogs are drained and stripped of vegetation – destroying their wildlife. Peatbogs are vitally important. The rarest type of bog is found in the lowlands. These 'raised' bogs are islands of sphagnum moss, living history books and home to fascination plants and animals such as the sundew and the raft spider. Amazing finds have been made in peat bogs including the mummified bodies of people who died thousands of years ago. Bogs store carbon, stopping it from escaping into the atmosphere as carbon dioxide – a 'greenhouse gas'. Lowland raised bog is one of Europe's rarest, most threatened habitats.

Only 6,000 ha of lowland bog remains in a near natural state in the UK (in 1997): 94 percent has been destroyed or damaged. People who would never dream of using products made of tigers and rhinos are causing the destruction of our own rare species by using peat in their gardens.

Composts and leafmould can replace peat in the garden, giving peatland wildlife a better chance of survival.

What is Community Composting?

Community Composting is where a group of people, a village, or couple of streets share a composting system. The community provides the raw materials and benefits from the end product. A portion of the material currently being disposed of in landfill sites is turned into a valuable product for use in the community, either by individuals in their own gardens or for larger projects within the local environment. It also helps local authorities meet government recycling targets.

What are the advantages?

There may be times when making compost alone is either impractical or undesirable. For example, a small back garden may not produce enough matter or the right balance of soft and woody material to build a successful compost heap. Working together for the benefit of the community pools resources and can make the venture more viable as well as more enjoyable.

Advantages of Community Composting

- Recycles one person's waste into another's resource
- Pools raw materials, enhancing the chances of creating a good end product
- Means fewer car trips to the tip
- Shares labour and enthusiasm
- Shares expense, materials, tools etc
- Groups can attract funds more easily than individuals
- Builds community spirit
- Provides education about recycling, composting and soil care
- Encourages an exchange of knowledge and experience between sectors of the community such as young and old, beginner and expert
- Raises awareness of environmental issues and problems
- Helps local authorities fulfil their commitment to Local Agenda 21 issues
- Makes it easier to take advantage of local marketing opportunities

The concept is a relatively new one, and projects are springing up all over the country. The Community Composting Network (see below) has a membership of more than 60. All the signs point to a substantial increase in Community Composting throughout the UK, and beyond.

Much of the legislation relating to Community Composting is untried and is developing as time goes on. Changes will occur in the laws and in their interpretation. Local authorities have different approaches to Community Composting. It is important to check with the relevant officials at each stage. What is permissible in one area may well not be in another.

Community Composting Network (CCN)

The Department of the Environment supported the establishment of CCN through the Environmental Action Fund in 1996.

Aims of the CCN

- To provide accessible, practical information about composting, including the social, legal, and financial aspects
- To identify all Community Composting projects throughout the country and catalogue the extent and nature of their work

- To promote information sharing, problem solving and buddy systems between projects

When considering starting a project, the CCN should be your first port of call. The Network is staffed part-time and produces a quarterly newsletter. Its steering group is made up of people who are closely involved in Community Composting and other recycling activities. They should be able to advise on all aspects of your operation and on any changes in legislation. The Network can supply a list of current projects – so you can get in touch with any other groups in your locality.