

Can I make compost in winter?

Yes. The easiest way to keep your compost rolling in the winter is to use straw bales for a thick layer of insulation against the cold. A cover of some sort, such as sheets of corrugated iron, plywood or some other suitable material will help to keep the moisture off and reduce heat loss. Straw will reduce heat loss and can absorb some of the rain, but, if there are heavy falls, most of the moisture will eventually pass into the heap.

Horse manure is well known for producing heat. In the old days it was the ideal 'fuel' for the vegetable hot beds. They used to lay down a thick layer of horse manure, cover this with 15 cm of soil and then put a glass frame over the top. They could then grow early vegetables in very cold weather. It was commonly used in Europe where they had a lot of stabled horses.

To help keep your compost heap warm, add a layer of horse manure or, if you can get hold of them, some types of seaweed, or the shells of crabs, lobsters or yabbies.

Even if your heap does nothing during winter, when spring comes and the heap warms up, it will get rolling. If it seems a little slow to start off in spring, push some holes through it with a crowbar and pour in some fish or seaweed emulsion or a herbal, bio-dynamic or commercial compost activator to get things rolling.

It is a good idea to make compost in winter. As Coleman says, when a product serves as many purposes as compost: fertiliser, soil amendment, weed-suppressing mulch, pH adjuster, disease preventer, earthworm encourager, topsoil replenisher, erosion preventer, it pays to keep making it, even when the growing season seems far away.

CASE STUDY: COMPOST MADE AND SUPPLIED

As you look through the stories of organic farming and as you listen to the growers you frequently hear about *compost*. Many growers produce their own compost but a significant number buy it in and would purchase more if they could find a reliable source.



Figure 39: The compost site

David Duggan at *Soil First* in Tasmania makes and supplies compost to organic growers and of course he uses as much as possible on his own Poll Hereford stud property but the amount spread on his own land is limited because he can't make enough product to satisfy the market. The cattle are grown organically but sold on the conventional market; the beef are produced organically for better health in the herd and improved farmland, not for price premium. The compost product is always in demand but the production causes quite a few challenges to David. The biggest challenge is finding an acceptable location for the process; the composting fish waste is volatile and can cause people with sensitive noses to complain even though the recommended distances from neighbouring properties is exceeded.

Enterprises that can dispose of their waste to *Soil First* are pleased that to have David turn it into productive compost; it solves a big problem for them and results in 10,000 tonne rows of finished product per annum. The product is usually sold in truck loads of 18 to 51 cubic metres. The windrows are 100 metres long and there are 35 of them at any time.

Figure 40: Close view of the compost

Materials used for composting rather than landfill include:

- wastes from the fish industry; 12000 to 13000 tonnes of treated fish waste from aqua culture farms
- culled layer hens and waste from chicken sheds
- milk, cream and cheese whey from dairies
- sludge from water treatment plants.



Figure 41: Fish being injected into the windrow



Figure 42: Turner



The rows are monitored each day with temperature probes, moisture probes and visual assessment. The rows are turned with turners pulled by tractors. The temperatures generated in the composting process kill all pathogens and weed seeds.

There are fourteen employees including four people at the compost site. Markets include the following: horticultural nurseries, vineyards, orchards and graziers. The compost is *custom blended* to suit each enterprise.

David says it is important for people to know what they are doing; he has seen others produce useless material they say is compost and this can lead to people becoming disillusioned. I guess he would say the proof of the product is in the odour, texture and results.