Notes

Can I add this, that or the other to my compost heap?

Yes, yes and yes. Generally, if it has ever been alive or has been made by something alive, the answer is yes. Grass cuttings, kitchen scraps, weeds, cooked or uncooked food, small twigs, urines, human faeces…it’s a long list.

However, if you add a lot of grass cuttings, they can rot down to form a layer that is fairly impervious to air, so the decomposition becomes anaerobic (stinky) or stops. So don’t add a thick layer of grass cuttings or leaves, without a few twigs or stalks from bigger plants that will give the heap some structure and allow air to pass through it.

Don’t add vegetable oil either. Small amounts will decompose, but if you tip your chip pan into there, you’ll coat everything in oil, again making it impervious to air, and so stopping the decomposition.

Do I need to chop things up first?

If you want your heap to decompose quickly and generate a lot of heat, which has the benefit of killing some of the weeds seeds, then chopping things up and turning the heap is the fastest route to go.

But I never bother. The bigger stuff creates air gaps in the heap, keeping it aerobic. It won’t get as hot as if I was careful with chopping things up, and paying attention to the mix, but I’m not in a hurry. My garden is big enough for two compost bins, so one sits decomposing while the other is being filled. By the time the second one is full, the first is ready to empty.

What about turning the heap?

The Humanure book has a whole section on turning the heap. Briefly, unless you’re in a big hurry and you want to maximise the killing of weeds seeds and you want the finished product to be as even as possible, there’s no need to turn the pile. A heap piled on a pallet gets air from below. Heat generated within the pile helps draw air upwards though the heap. It gets enough oxygen. Some say turning the heap ensures the whole heap gets enough oxygen, but it turns out it takes a few minutes, hours at most for the oxygen levels to fall back to what they were before the heap was turned. I don’t bother. Anything not ready for putting on the garden or into pots gets thrown into the other heap. Coarse stuff gets used as it is, without sieving.

When is the compost finished?

Never. It’s a continuous process. While there remain plant materials of any visible size, they will carry on decaying, releasing water, CO2, nitrates, minerals such as phosphorus, potassium and calcium which can be reabsorbed by plants. It’s a slow process. In the meantime, the compost gives structure to the soil, allowing water, air and small creatures to travel through it.

When you first make a compost heap, it heats up, and thermophilic bacteria take over. The heat and competition from these bacteria reduce the numbers of potentially pathogenic bacteria. Once the heap cools, fungi generally take over, continuing the decomposition process at a slow pace. People say it’s ready when you can’t recognise anything that went into it. You can use it before then, unless you’ve added poop to your pile. Then people say give it a couple of years. I usually use it in six months. No problem. But if you get a problem, don’t quote me.