

compost. But removing the plastic from the finished compost can be a bit of a nuisance, so it is best to keep this problem to a minimum. In the fullness of time we shall have to bully manufacturers not to put plastic on their packaging; it has no function apart from making the printing look sharp and glossy. As for printing inks, contrary to a persistent urban myth, they are not a problem (see box 1).

What do you actually do?

The basic method is extremely simple. A layer of crumpled cardboard and paper is put in the bottom of a container, say 20-30cm deep, ideally with some worm-rich compost from a previous batch, or someone else's system. Then the heap is simply fed with 'soft wastes' as they arise (see table in pages 2-3). For typical households this generates approximately equal volumes of <bread> and <cheese> in suitable layers or cells. Otherwise the 'sandwich' rules are followed, for example grass clippings should not be introduced in layers thicker than 15cm. If there is more than this, extra crumpled paper/cardboard should be introduced.

Over the next few months, the organisms and biological processes summarised in figure 7 swing into action, and a zone of fine dung or 'frass' builds up from the bottom. As more material is added at the top, the zone of furious decomposer activity moves up with it. In a mature heap you will usually find a heaving layer of worms about six inches below the surface. In fact it is a good check that everything is OK to dig down a little way from the top and observe the visible activity. A correctly functioning High Fibre heap should be visibly lively.



Figure 6: Typical profile of a High Fibre compost heap. At the top, fresh material just added – note cereal box. Below, dark crumbly humus.

The invertebrates are essential to the HF system: it doesn't work without them. They are all likely to be in your garden anyway, so in most cases they just turn up, although it takes a while for the populations to build up in the heap. Once you have got a good mixed population going there is usually no further problem for new batches of compost. It's the beginning that is most difficult, a danger that the cheese will putrefy and set everything off in the wrong direction. To ensure a good start it is best to overdo the bread a bit to make sure there's plenty of air, and seed the heap with a good batch of worms from a similar heap, or failing that, get worms from a fishing-tackle shop or from suppliers of wormery systems. The commonest kind is the small stripy brandling or tiger worm *Eisenia foetida*, although *Dendrobaena* worms are equally good. You might find that small white worms become common; these are 'enchytraeids' or potworms and more tolerant of acidic conditions. They do the job but not as well as the larger red worms.

Eventually your compost container will fill up and need emptying. But the top will still have undecomposed material from the last contribution, while the finished compost will be at the bottom (see figure 6). There are various things you can do about this, and to some extent this depends on the design of your container, which we will now discuss.

Containers

Making compost, either by the classical method or the HF method, does not absolutely need a container. But without some kind of enclosure the stuff gets scattered about by wind and animals. Almost any kind of

Applying the <bread and cheese> principles

Constituent	What happens if there is not enough?	Remedy	
		First Aid	Long-term
Water	Goes slowly or stops In HF systems you will find ants and woodlice rather than worms	Add water Several litres through rose of watering-can over several days; or better, leave cover off during rain	Leave cover off permanently Use more <cheese> especially wetter kitchen wastes such as tea leaves/coffee grounds, or freshly-mown grass clippings
Nitrogen	Goes Slowly	Mix in moist <cheese> such as fresh grass clippings or plate waste	Use more <cheese> You can also add urine diluted 10:1 through the watering-can rose
Carbon	Smelly Smells of ammonia, like a farmyard or stable	Mix in <sliced bread>	Use more <sliced> or <Ryvita>
Oxygen	Smelly Smells putrid or sour	Turn the heap Mix in dry <bread> Balled cardboard is good and <Ryvita> is often easier to mix in	Use more <bread> If persistent, occasional layers of <Ryvita>. Regular addition of <ship's biscuit> gives a permanent solution but very coarse compost