

What Exactly is Meant by Compost?

Compost is made from a range of biodegradable (organic) materials, such as grass cuttings, leaves, hedge cuttings and brown bin material that have been broken down and recycled naturally.

How is Compost Made?

Recycled garden materials, brown bin materials and other biodegradable materials are composted at sites across Ireland to produce a well decomposed soil-like product that is a good source of nutrients and organic matter.

The composting process involves a period of rapid decomposition and high temperatures which sanitises the material followed by a cooler period in which the compost is matured. When the process is complete, the compost can be graded for different uses such as mulch, turf top dressing etc.

What Kind of Landscape Applications can Compost be Used for?

Compost is an extremely versatile product that can improve the physical, chemical and biological characteristics of the soil. It has a variety of uses in a wide range of landscape activities, and selections of different grades are available depending on its intended purpose. For example, coarse, woody composts are needed for mulches, where as a finely screened compost would be used on turf to allow the particles to disperse easily.

Compost can be used in a wide range of applications such as:

- ▶ Top dressing of grass
- ▶ Garden bed establishment
- ▶ Manufactured topsoil
- ▶ Tree and shrub planting
- ▶ Mulching
- ▶ Turf establishment, renovation and maintenance

Compost production rates are growing at a great pace in Ireland and Northern Ireland, meaning higher volumes of quality compost are now becoming available to the landscape industry at prices that are on par with existing alternatives. In addition, it is becoming more difficult to locate cost-effective, high quality natural topsoils so compost is increasingly being used to create excellent manufactured equivalents.

In both Europe and North America, the growth of the composting industry has been a boost to landscaping, providing it with products that are effective and economical.

How can I be Sure Compost is of a Sufficiently High Standard for my Purpose?

In Ireland, all composting sites, as part of their waste permit/waste licences, test compost to ensure it meets a compost quality standard and is fit for use. A National Standard for Compost was recently published (I.S. 441). A voluntary compost quality assurance scheme is being developed to provide independent certification to the National Compost Standard.

In Northern Ireland, for compost produced from source-segregated input material, there is a compost quality protocol alongside the composting specification PAS100:2010. When manufactured to conform to the quality protocol the material is considered a product and no longer influenced by waste legislation.

This means that composts both from Northern Ireland and Ireland which meet standards are quality products, traceable, safe and reliable.

What are the Benefits of Using Compost?

Soils that require landscaping are often situated on land that has suffered from prior use, leaving soils in a poor condition. Some of the key benefits of using compost include:

- ▶ **Reduces the Need for Additional Fertilisers**
Compost provides the soil with primary nutrients such as potassium, phosphate and to a lesser extent available nitrogen. It provides a full range of minor nutrients or trace elements (e.g. zinc, copper, manganese and boron) - which many conventional fertilisers and inorganic additives are not always needed. For acidic soils it can reduce the need for lime or even totally dispense the need for lime.
- ▶ **Better Plant Survival and Growth**
As well as adding key nutrients, compost can improve soil structure, allowing it to better resist compaction. This improves the soil's water and nutrient holding capability, and allows roots to penetrate more easily, leading to healthier plants.
- ▶ **Help Soil Retain Water**
As the soil holds water better, less watering is needed, leading to savings in labour and costs. This is especially true for light sandy soils. It improves aeration of heavy clayey soils.

▶ **Enhanced Erosion and Weed Control**

Compost binds soil and can provide an excellent defence against wind and rain erosion – especially on light soils. Compost mulches also offer an inexpensive, environmentally-safe means of weed control. This then reduces the need for chemical herbicides, which can be expensive and damaging to the environment.

▶ **Contains Valuable Micro-organisms**

These micro-organisms have three key benefits. They help to release the nutrients held in organic matter, they improve the structure of the soil, and in some instances they may suppress soil borne pathogens- avoiding the need to use chemical methods of control.

All these benefits can lead to healthier plants, faster establishments and fewer plant losses, ultimately giving savings in time and money.

Isn't Compost Expensive?

The use of compost can actually save money on a project. For example:

- ▶ Reduced need for fertilisers - as compost provides many key nutrients; additional fertilisers may not be required, except in the case of fast growing plants might need additional nitrogen
- ▶ Irrigation costs can be reduced - compost allows soil to better retain water, meaning less frequent watering is needed
- ▶ Plants grown in compost are more likely to survive - saving money in terms of product and necessary labour involved in replanting
- ▶ On sites where there is no natural topsoil, manufacturing soils on site using compost can save money on transport and raw materials

These cost-saving benefits are not just important in the short term. By using compost to improve overall soil health, sustainable landscapes are being created which will require fewer inputs in

the long term. For example fewer chemical additions in terms of fertilisers or herbicides, and less watering.

Ongoing improved soil health will allow future generations to benefit from the advantages compost can bring to landscapes without requiring a high level of maintenance.

Where Might the Use of Compost be Particularly Important?

Compost can be beneficial in most kinds of landscape applications, but it may be particularly useful on brownfield or urban regeneration sites, where the soil quality has suffered from previous use. For example, on brownfield sites the soil's organic matter content may often be less than 2%. Here, compost can improve and enrich soils which have been left in a poor condition. Manufacturing of replacement soils on site using existing low quality soils can save money on disposal and the cost of buying natural topsoil.

In addition, as pressure to deliver sustainable urban environments increases, the use of quality assured compost can add real value by contributing to an environmentally sound development.

Compost Network

Cré Compost Skillnet is a training network whose main aim is to train compost operators to produce high quality compost and to train organic farmers/landscapers how to use compost. If you are interested in finding out more about this training network log on www.cre.ie or call 086 8129260.

Cré Compost Skillnet is funded by member companies and the Training Networks Programme, an initiative of Skillnets Ltd. funded from the National Training Fund through the Department of Education and Skills.

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