



COMPOSTING *the* BIODYNAMIC WAY

Building fertile soil to grow healthy, productive plants must be the ultimate goal of any gardener. Biodynamic gardeners use special techniques to do this, as keen proponent **Julie Moore** explains



Many gardeners are constantly adding waste to their compost heap

Healthy soil is a sensitive living organism—it's alive with worms, fungi, bacteria and other organisms which are all vital for plant health. However, it's important to respect the soil and not force it to produce as much as it can, even if it appears capable of doing so. Instead, we must respect our soil, nurturing and feeding it so it in turn can feed the crops we grow.

From a biodynamic perspective, no matter how large or small your garden, it's vital that nutrients are recycled around the garden, thus maintaining a circle of fertility. Composting is essential to this self-sustaining process and serves as a way to recycle animal manures and organic waste. The resulting compost, having been duly treated with the biodynamic preparations, is genuinely 'black gold', ready for its duty to give new life to your soil. ►

THE COMPOST PREPARATIONS

■ **YARROW 502** (*Achillea millefolium*) Yarrow flowers are stuffed into a stag's bladder and hung in a tree over summer before being buried in the ground in autumn for six months. Yarrow is high in potassium and sulphur and helps to capture the beneficial forces entering our atmosphere from the celestial sphere beyond so as to replenish a soil tired through years of cultivation.

■ **CHAMOMILE 503** (*Matricaria recutita*) Chamomile flowers are composted inside a cow's intestine and buried in the soil over winter. Chamomile has balanced proportions of sulphur and calcium which regulate decomposition, stabilise plant nutrients and invigorate plant growth.

■ **STINGING NETTLE 504** (*Urtica dioica*) Nettles are packed into clay pots and buried in the soil for at least a calendar year. Related to iron, this preparation helps to stabilise nitrogen, develops sensitivity in the soil and promotes the formation of humus.

■ **OAK BARK 505** (*Quercus robur*) Crumbled oak bark is stuffed inside the skull of a farm animal and left to soak under water over winter. Rich in calcium, oak bark helps increase resistance to plant diseases and fungal attacks.

■ **DANDELION 506** (*Taraxacum officinale*) Dandelion flowers are encased in a cow's mesentery and buried in the ground for six months over winter. Dandelion activates light influences in the soil and helps plants to connect with their immediate environment and the celestial sphere above.

■ **VALERIAN 507** (*Valeriana officinalis*) The only compost preparation that comes in liquid form – a solution of valerian flowers is sprayed over the whole compost heap. Always the last preparation to be added, it seals in the beneficial forces of the other preparations. It acts like a protective skin and provides a warm blanket around the compost heap. It also helps to mobilise phosphate-activating bacteria in the compost heap and soil itself.



Yarrow



Chamomile



Stinging nettle



Oak bark



Dandelion



Valerian

Every year, our gardens and plots produce organic matter in the form of weeds that we've dug up – dead plants, grass cuttings, leaves and woody prunings. Add to this kitchen waste and wood ash and, before you know it, you have all the ingredients to make compost.

It wasn't that long ago that I used to pile everything from the kitchen and garden on to my compost heap in the knowledge that eventually it would all decompose and I'd be left with compost. Biodynamic composting is more of an art, requiring you to actively and consciously build a heap rather than randomly throwing materials on to it. By layering your compost materials, you have more control over how your heap forms and the carbon-to-nitrogen ratio can be monitored more easily.

A biodynamic compost heap in its truest form is made all in one go. The size of the heap will obviously be dictated by the materials available. For a garden heap, two metres by one metre to one-and-a-half metres high is a good size to maintain optimum temperatures. Anything smaller will be a 'cold' compost heap which means it will take longer to break down. Layers of garden and kitchen waste are interspersed with a thin layer of soil (compost from the previous year). By consciously building the heap all at once, you make sure that the correct carbon-to-nitrogen ratio is maintained – you're looking for around 70% carbon and 30% nitrogen (the carbon helps to cool the compost down). Your heap should have a slight wobble when tapped with a fork – this signifies that air is able to penetrate the heap to help aerobic breakdown.

HEALING REMEDIES

Once the heap is assembled, the biodynamic compost preparations are added. The preparations can be viewed as healing remedies for the earth. The preparations are made from medicinal herbs treated in specific ways. The resulting substances, when added to the compost heap, regulate and aid the decomposition process, balance the nutrients and minerals in the heap and limit nutrient loss. The effect of the preparations continues when the compost is spread on the soil, enhancing sensitivity to cosmic rhythms and balancing life processes, especially with regards to the way that nutrients are made available to plants.

The preparations often attract attention because four of the six herbs are placed in sheaths from animal organs. Animal organs are chosen for the particular properties they possess as a result of their function within the animal. For example, chamomile flowers are used to treat digestive disorders so it makes sense that a cow's intestine is used as the catalyst in the fermentation process. Fertile soil is not just made up of mineral substances – it's alive and full of animal life. It's therefore unsurprising that some of the preparations need a little something from the animal kingdom in order to be fully effective.

Making the preparations is a lengthy and time-consuming process and outside the scope of this article. The preparations can be ordered from the Biodynamic Association.

STEP BY STEP MAKE YOUR OWN BIODYNAMIC COMPOST



STEP 1: Spread a thin layer of twiggy prunings to help airflow at the base



STEP 2: Layer so that soft green waste is balanced with carbon-rich woody materials



STEP 3: Shred or chop your woody waste up small to help it break down faster



STEP 4: Adding crushed eggshells will increase the calcium content



STEP 5: When ready to add waste, sprinkle a teaspoon of Mausdorf Starter over the heap



STEP 6: The finished 'black gold' compost should be rich and crumbly

ADDING THE PREPARATIONS

To add the preparations, make five evenly spaced holes in the shape of a five dice and deep enough to reach the centre of the heap. Take five small balls of compost and push your finger into it to make a 'nest'. Place a pinch of

compost preparation (502-506) into each 'nest' – one preparation to one nest. Close the 'nest' up so you have a ball again and drop the ball into each of the holes you've made. The

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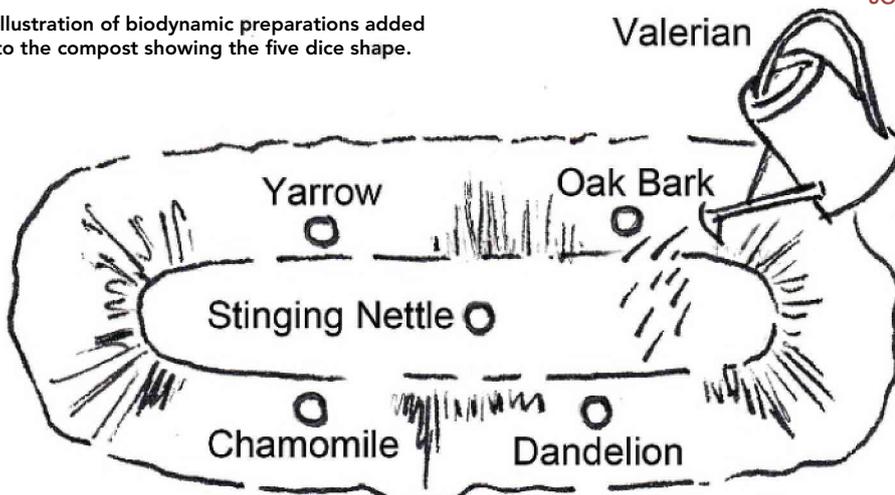
nettle preparation is always placed in the centre. The holes can then be back-filled with material from the heap. Finally, a liquid valerian mix is applied using a watering can. Cover all over with straw or hay to protect the heap from rainwater entering.

Leave the heap for five to six months, after which you'll find a potent compost which has formed a humus colloid (able to hold its own structure) and is ready to increase vitality and soil health. Five kilos of mature compost is sufficient for five square metres.

For small-scale gardeners, it's simply not possible to generate enough waste to make a biodynamic compost heap in one go. It may also not be practical to store bags of gathered waste until there is enough material needed to make a heap.

Even though many gardeners are constantly adding waste to their compost heap as and when it appears, there is another way for gardeners to get the preparations on to their plots. ➤

Illustration of biodynamic preparations added to the compost showing the five dice shape.



MAUSDORF STARTER

Instead of adding the preparations per se, small amounts of Maudsorf Starter can be sprinkled into the compost bin before new material is added. Maudsorf Starter is essentially the dried and ground form of the Barrel Preparation developed by the late Maria Thun, a leading authority on biodynamics.

The starter is made by adding small amounts of basalt dust (to aid healthy decomposition) and calcium-rich eggshells to fresh cow pats. The mixture is vigorously aerated before being tipped into a barrel. It is then turned a number of times and on each occasion the compost preparations are added. Finally, the material, some of which will be completely broken down and some only partly rotted, is mixed before adding the last application of compost preparations. The material is then dried and ground for storage.

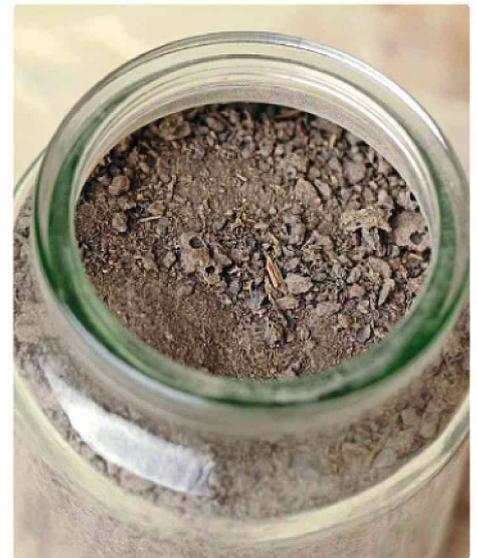
As the starter is very potent, you only need to sprinkle a teaspoon's worth over your compost heap before you add new material to the heap. The starter activates organic matter conversion and is an ideal way of adding a blast of cow power as well as the compost preparations to your soil.

Maudsorf Starter is best kept in a pot, jar or other dry container and stored in a cool, dry place until needed. The starter can be purchased from the Biodynamic Agricultural Association.

Can there be a better sense of achievement than running your fingers through dark, earthy-smelling compost fresh from the heap and ready for its duty of enhancing soil health and building soil humus while emanating forces of the cosmos – the moon, the planets and the constellation to revitalise your plot? Biodynamic compost is certainly worth its weight in gold. ■



Maudsorf Starter as it arrives from the Biodynamic Association (www.biodynamic.org.uk)



It is essentially the dried and ground version of the Barrel Preparation developed by Maria Thun



There is an animal element to the technique



Adding compost encourages better root growth



Look after your soil and expect bumper crops

Tips To Biodynamic Composting Success

- Site the compost away from hungry tree roots as these will drain the heap of valuable nutrients
- Site the compost heap on soil rather than a hard surface such as concrete. Micro-organisms that contribute to the decomposition process can enter the heap from the soil beneath
- Chop everything up small – the smaller the better! This includes green waste such as cabbage leaves and hedge clippings – everything should look as though it's been through a shredder
- Compost heaps have a tendency to dry out, particularly if high-carbon materials are added. Watering regularly before adding a new layer will avoid the need to turn the compost



Site the compost away from hungry tree roots, on soil rather than a hard surface

CONTACT DETAILS

The biodynamic preparations and Maudsorf Starter can be purchased directly from:
 The Biodynamic Association
 Gloucester Street, Stroud, GL5 1QG
<https://www.biodynamic.org.uk/>