

# GARDEN NEWS



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## THE SATISFACTION OF HOMEMADE COMPOST

**M**y grandfather was an avid composter, using all his garden and kitchen waste, not because of environmental beliefs but out of necessity as in the former East Germany it was virtually impossible to get hold of any chemical fertilizer. He was also a great one for keeping his four-year-old granddaughter occupied with odd jobs so that he could get some actual gardening done. In the autumn he would show me how to pick up fallen leaves from the rows of vegetables and how to make leaf mould to enrich next year's harvest.

My grandfather understood only too well how to manipulate the naïve, and wise enough to make me feel special by saying that I could do this job so much better than he would because my feet were so much smaller than his. It wasn't until I was older that I fully understood that his anxiety over keeping the vegetables undamaged was due to the fact that – even in the communist Utopia of the GDR – there would be a dearth of fresh cabbages or brussels sprouts in the shops all winter. At the time, however, I was far more interested in tempting the hedgehog into the open. I had already tried to encourage it to show its cute face by putting out a saucer of milk, but it was more interested in the warmth of the compost heap.

These childhood memories of mine were triggered recently when we used the first batch of homemade leaf mould in the borders of the

Inner Temple Garden. The unmistakable, earthy smell of the rotted leaves was headily nostalgic as we added handfuls to the planting holes for the biennials and perennials in the flower beds. In 2012, we specifically collected the leaves of the tulip, Indian Bean, cherry, walnut and mulberry trees and used the mower to shred them, then stored 4 tonnes in large heavy-duty bags. We pierced the sides of the bags for air circulation and left them for twelve months to thoroughly rot down. A year later, we had 2 tonnes of 'black gold', nature's greatest soil improver and one that is impossible to buy. It can either be dug in or used as surface mulch: it helps to break down heavy clay, retains moisture in sandy soils, and promotes the activities of beneficial worms and other micro-organisms.

After the success and satisfaction of this initial experiment, 2013 saw us enthusiastically collect, shred and bag-up over 10 tonnes of 'black gold' for next autumn. The bulging bags need to be regularly checked to make sure their moisture levels are kept up, hence my often being spotted lurking over them, though subconsciously this attention to detail may just have more to do with my wanting to discover that Mrs Tiggy-Winkle and her family have taken up residence...

