

The compost *special*

It may not be glamorous... but it is black gold for the smallholder. **Kim Stoddart** investigates



Kim with her compost pile

Okay, I'll admit; the idea of a big pile of slowly rotting household waste may not sound a) glamorous or indeed b) the most exciting of subjects... yet what's not to like about the ability to turn much of your kitchen and smallholding waste into the most fantastic black gold for your fruit and vegetables?

Alongside the satisfying warm feeling inside that you get from knowing you're responsibly transforming your vegetable peelings - home-made compost is truly invaluable. Adding it to the ground helps improve soil health which in turn will boost your food growing efforts no end. Plus, regular mulching with this nutrient-rich humus will feed your plants and

Common myth 1 – aren't compost heaps... well... stinky?

No, thankfully not; they should actually smell rather nice. It is true that, on rare occasions, a heap can 'go bad', in which case it'll smell, but as long as you use some common sense and don't throw in anything silly such as a fish or pork chop – this is most unlikely to happen.

That said, there are now bins where you can do just that; where you can chuck in pretty much any (and all) waste from your kitchen and it'll get broken down quickly and transformed – but I'll come to these in a bit...

suppress pesky weeds. It also has the added benefit of helping to absorb and keep in moisture, so it is an important ally in our ever changing climate.

How to make it – the basics

Really, all you need is a roughly equal mix of brown (cardboard, sawdust, leaves or straw) and green layers (grass cuttings, fruit and veg peelings, plant clippings etc) and, as if by magic, they will, over time, transform into this most wonderful material. Of course, it's more complicated than that, but the truth of the matter is - it's hard to go wrong.

It was Ben Raskin's excellent book *Compost – A Family Guide to Making Soil from Scraps*, that really made me

understand exactly how the process works. Yes, that's right a children's book, which gives the best down-to-earth (literally) guide to the subject that I have yet come across. As Ben explains: "Making compost at home is basically just copying what happens in nature. The ingredients that we need – water, air, organisms – can be found all around us, we just need to provide the right conditions for them to work in a way that fits our garden."

The book explains how worms, alongside billions of other microorganisms, are the heroes of the compost heap – working hard on our behalf to transform our waste. From fungi, (which tackle heavier jobs such as woody material), through to the many different types of bacteria, they all have a different part to play in the process. Which is why I've learnt that arguably the sure fire way to making healthy, active compost is to ensure you have as many as possible of these little helpers involved in the process from the start.

The easiest way to do this is to have your pile directly touching the earth; this way, worms, and their compost-making pals, can work their way in to lend a hand. Otherwise, I've found adding a layer of earth, or even better, active compost every few layers, really helps to speed things along. Obviously, turning it is also recommended, but this can become time consuming and the layering with active ingredients really makes a difference.

Other useful ingredients to help supercharge the compost heap include stinging nettles (without seed or roots), comfrey, borage and seaweed. I do this nowadays rather than making separate fertilisers with them. It all ends up in the same place – on the veg patch, providing a fantastic slow release feed for my plants. Chicken poo is also an excellent compost accelerator, so their spent bedding makes a good addition. You can, of course, add



Compost layers (Image from Ben Raskin's book)



Creating 'black' gold in a compost bin

in other animal manure, but personally I prefer to have a separate pile for this.

The options

In my view you can't beat a good old fashioned compost pile. My four chamber effort has been constructed for free from a combination of old wooden fencing posts, pallets and spare chicken wire and it does the job perfectly.

If you fancy experimenting however, there are a variety of different options available, here are just a few:

Other types of bin

From your bog standard plastic bins (which you can often pick up very cheaply via your local council) to attractive (but more expensive) hive-shaped wooden bins, the options are extensive. Tumbler bins are a good choice if you want to process your compost quickly as they enable you to turn the pile by way of a handle, thereby speeding up the process rather dramatically. As the bin is fully sealed and usually off the ground, they are rodent proof and can make a safe (and attractive) addition to a patio or balcony. Not cheap but generally solid and built to last – they cost in the region of £100.

Wormeries

As long as you don't have an issue with worms (and if you do – shame on you) then this system can work very well. Also known as vermicomposting, it will process the same kitchen waste as a traditional compost bin although you need to avoid

adding citrus as the worms really don't like anything too acidic. This method will in turn provide you with a fantastic nutrient-rich compost as well as a liquid plant feed, both of which are ideal for boosting the results from nutrient hungry plants like tomatoes and peppers especially. The liquid fertiliser needs to be diluted 10 to 1 so even a little goes an incredibly long way.

You can also keep them in your house if you so desire. Original Organics, the company that first brought the wormery to market, recommends the stainless steel wormery as being hygienically best for indoor use. It retails at £64.95. They also sell a junior wormery which is ideal →

Common myth 2 – open compost bins attract rats

As any smallholder will testify, rats move in at each and every opportunity. Yet again, as long as you don't add any cooked food or meat to the pile, it's highly unlikely to happen. You're much more likely to get toads or mice checking into chez compost pile as a winter residence, which really isn't a problem.

If you're still worried about this, then I'd suggest just making sure your pile is suitably located somewhere out of the way. There is also the option of using an enclosed plastic compost bin which will undoubtedly keep out rodents – the only trouble is they also tend to make it harder for worms and other beneficial creatures to move in as they are closed off from the ground.

for single person use or as a project for children and which costs £39.95 and the midi which is a bit bigger at £49.95.

Hot composting

A good way to get super-fast results (30 to 90 days) easily is via one of the hotter composting systems. Although more expensive, these units will apparently safely kill off weed seeds and pathogens and you can feed them a much wider variety of waste than normal, including cooked food, dairy and meat leftovers. The Green Johanna is recommended for a shady spot and costs from £108.90 via www.greatgreensystems.com, while the Hot Bin starts at £165.00 from www.hotbincomposting.com and has had rave reviews.

Composting, Japanese-style

This rather fascinating process ferments your kitchen waste by way of an intriguing mix of wheatbran, molasses and micro-organisms. Like the hot bin system you can feed it any food waste including fish and meat leftovers, safe in the knowledge that all pathogen nasties will be killed off. It's

ideal for indoor use because the buckets are small and don't smell. You simply pile each layer of waste with some of the 'magic' bokashi bran and when the bin is full, leave it for a couple of weeks to further ferment before using it as plant food. Be warned though that the end result doesn't look particularly compost like, more pickled, but once mixed into soil it breaks down rapidly. It's best to have two bins on the go so you can alternate usage.

It's widely regarded as one of the easiest composting systems out there. Wiggly Wiggles sell urban bokashi systems starting at £29.95 for a single bucket.

More unusual methods

First off there's the rollable CompoSphere, which sounds rather fun. Like a tumbler system, the idea is you can turn the contents to speed up the composting process. It's just in this case you roll it about the garden instead. It sounds like a good idea for children and big kids everywhere. Original Organics sell them for £99.95.

Then there's the Pet Poo Loo which is a wormery for dog poo and the like and



Good quality compost

billed as an environmentally friendly way to dispose of your pooch's little (or not so little) deposits. Although it produces a viable compost and liquid plant feed, it's not recommended that this is used on vegetable patches or areas where young children play. If this tempts you - they are available for £67.90 via Original Organics.

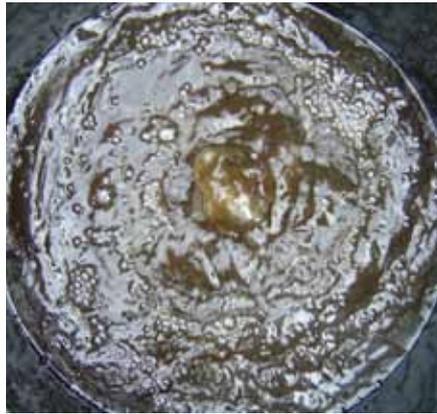
If that didn't make you feel a bit squeamish then get this; the Biopod Grub Composter which retails for \$185 via www.compostmania.com processes kitchen



Enclosed compost bins



Using stinging nettles



Compost tea brewing

scraps by way of a grub-based system, or to be more precise, by a lot of juvenile Black Soldier Flies. Apparently this is an excellent choice for fish, bullfrog, chicken and songbird feeders. I'll spare you any more details about crawl off ramps and the like but I have to admit - that one's a bit much for me.

Tea making

Make your compost go further

I'd previously dismissed the prospect of compost tea making – considering it to be too much effort for little guaranteed return. Yet the more I understand about the importance of healthy soil bacteria, the more the prospect of adding more of just that to protect and boost plants health and vitality, makes an awful lot of sense. Then I read about the Soil Association's field labs (via the Innovative Farmers' programme) where one farmer saw their yields increase 35-50% on the fields tested in the first year of application, and now I'm a convert.

So how does it work?

By way of a little compost brewing (tea making) you are able to feed, and greatly expand the population of beneficial micro-organisms in your compost to such an extent that they can be spread over a much wider area than you would be able to hand apply otherwise. There's a lot of complicated science on the subject but, suffice to say, it's a bit like taking probiotics and enhancing your healthy gut bacteria to boost your immune system – just for plants.

There are many videos on YouTube which explain how to make it and you can buy the equipment separately or by way of one of the many starter kits out there. You'll need good quality compost, an aquarium pump and piping (to aerate the water), a big bucket (15 to 20 litre), an air stone and some molasses to feed the microbes in the brew. Symbio www.bioorganicarden.co.uk sell a range of useful materials, with a starter kit

designed for a garden or allotment at £27.

A little liquid seaweed also makes a nice addition to the mix and the tea takes about two days before it is ready by which point it should give off a nice sweet, earthy smell. Then it's just a case of straining the liquid into another container (a pair of ladies tights normally comes in handy) and the mixture is ready to be used. In fact it should be used straight away, or within a few hours, as this is when the live solution will be at its most effective.

The tea can be used neat or diluted with water then applied (using a watering can or sprayer) to the leaves of your growing or newly emerging seedlings to provide protection against disease throughout the growing season.

Other compost making ideas

Using wood chip to make seed compost

It's an easy material to get hold of as you'll be doing a tree surgeon a favour by offering

to take some off them. It can be added as a brown material to your existing compost pile, used as a mulch around trees and bushes, or made into seed compost. As Ben Raskin, head of horticulture at the Soil Association, said: "We recognise that good compost is at the heart of many organic systems, but we're always keen to learn more about how different materials work to get the most from what we have. As part of the Innovative Farmers Programme www.innovativefarmers.org/ groups of growers have been doing what are called 'Field Labs' or on farm research to do just this. One grower, Iain Tolhurst makes his own woodchip propagation compost using a really simple method of turning. In the trials this performed as well as a leading commercial seed compost.

The wonders of leaf mould

This autumn as the trees around your smallholding shed their leaves, why not make better use of this free bounty. It's a fantastic material which can be added into your compost as a brown layer, or left to make the aforementioned leaf mould. Which as it just so happens can also be used as a highly effective seed compost. When I was gardening entirely for free for my Guardian column, I actually used nothing but this and it worked really well.

A time-saving tip - rather than messing about with specially made bins or sifting, why not see where the leaves have fallen and try and work around these areas. The leaves rot down an awful lot more quickly in thin layers, so a patch left in a shady spot around a tree or two will have broken down sufficiently to be used by the spring.



Adding veg waste from the kitchen