

I have owned a Can-O-Worms since about 1998, when I read how kitchen waste can be turned into a nutrient rich compost in a fraction of the time standard compost takes. The worms soon proved themselves and I have since become a bit of a compost geek, now having two Can-O-Worms, two Bokashi Buckets and three compost bins, which are all we can fit into our reasonably small garden.

I'm fascinated by the whole process of composting and last year managed to compost all the cardboard that our household used, which not only meant our wheely bin was a lot emptier but that both the worms and the compost bins got a good dose of much needed carbon and that has helped produce this year's batch of 'Black Gold' for the garden.

My compost bins (2 plastic 'Daleks' and a recycled water butt) are run as a three bin system, so that one contains almost ready compost, one is about half made and the other is the bin being added to. Each Spring and Autumn the most ready bin gets emptied and its contents spread where needed, the half-composted wastes in the middle bin get turned over into the now empty bin and the third one gets turned over into the middle, leaving it empty to start being filled again. This turning of the compost (and a session or two with a Wiggly Compost Mate, P0598, in between) keeps the compost aerated and helps keep the whole process moving along nicely.

The compost produced over the years has all been put to use in my own garden. I've used it as everything from a soil improver to a mulch for both flowers and vegetables. With the garden being quite small, I've been experimenting with growing some vegetables in pots and had some amazing results—last year, a single runner bean plant in a large pot filled with a mixture of Bokashi treated waste, worm compost and a top dressing of standard potting compost fed this family of four a couple of meals a week for nearly 3 months! Recently, I have set up a couple of one metre square Link-a-Bord Raised Beds I got from Wiggly Wigglers and managed to grow cauliflowers and rocket in one and onions, carrots, leeks, spinach and the odd lettuce or two in the other. I can honestly say that I was astonished, both at how much I was able to produce and how nice it all tasted.

Secrets of a Master Composter

by Simon Sherlock

When I refer to myself as a compost geek I'm really not kidding, I will gladly chat for hours to people about how you can reduce what you throw away (I hate calling it 'waste' because it's only waste if it goes to landfill—if you can compost what you would otherwise throw away then it becomes a valuable resource, as well as stopping all the nasties that build up as a result of it going to landfill). I have also recently become one of Cheshire's Master Composters. We are a group of people prepared to give talks, advice and write articles on the joys of composting and how anybody, anywhere, can compost no matter how small their garden, whether they live in a flat with nothing more than a balcony or generally just have no idea where to start. The Master Composter scheme is run jointly between local Councils and Garden Organic, so if you are looking for some free advice about composting then contact your local Council and they will put you in touch with somebody who will gladly spend some time helping you out and advising on how best to proceed. Further information about the Master Composter scheme can be found online at www.homecomposting.org.uk

"I have a Worm Cafe, two Can-O-Worms, two Bokashi Buckets and three Compost Bins!"

We have recently set up a Transitions Initiative in the village where I live to encourage people to think local, grow their own, conserve energy and generally make the village more resilient to both the environmental and economic challenges that we're facing now. Through this initiative, we already have an energy group working in partnership with the Energy Saving Trust to promote better insulation and green power (wind and solar etc); an allotment society that has managed to procure some land from a local farmer for 17 plots (planning permission permitting); a local produce market allowing local producers to sell local produce to local people; and we are generally encouraging better communication between the schools and organisations that operate within the village. Oh, and there's a Master Composter available to give advice on composting at those new allotments!

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Why Compost with Worms?

Heather has asked me to write a bit on my views of composting with worms and it's hard to know where to start, as it really is as easy as just saying "They're fantastic!"

Here's a few points off the top of my head:

- You can feed them your kitchen peelings, toilet rolls, tea bags and anything else that is organic (but not cooked foods, use Bokashi for that).
- They don't take up as much space as a compost heap or bin, and eat up to half their body weight in food a day.
- What they leave behind (vermicompost) makes an unbelievably high quality compost that can be used for top dressing house plants, improving the soil and feeding the plants in your garden.
- The leachate they produce in the sump can be watered down and used as an organic liquid fertiliser—my tomatoes (also grown in pots) are testament to how good this stuff is, as are our house plants.

I honestly think that everybody should own a wormery, not only because they work so hard but because they also make you think about how we can work with nature and put it to work for us, rather than us constantly working against it causing all the CO₂ and methane problems in landfills.

How to look after worms

Worms do take a little looking after. The Wiggly Wigglers Facebook group is a great place to go if you have any questions or worries about how you should be doing it, but here are my tips:

Don't over feed Worms are wonderful but they do take time to get established. They cannot just go from being set-up in a new home one day to handling every bit of organic waste a family can throw at them the next.

Add stuff slowly at first, and check that they are keeping up before adding anything new. Delve into the compost and see if there is black vermicompost a couple of inches below the surface, this shows they are eating well and pretty much keeping up with you.

Add too much, too soon and the contents will start to smell, attract flies and can eventually kill your worms.



Add paper and cardboard The best way to make compost is to mix 'greens' (peelings and kitchen waste) with 'browns' (cardboard and shredded paper). The shredded paper helps create air pockets in the bin to keep it oxygenated (worms like oxygen), it helps stop the compost from getting soggy (and smelly) and the worms adore the stuff. It's also a great way of getting rid of confidential documents: shred them and cover the worm food with them. Anybody who can glue a shredded credit card statement back together once it has been through a worm probably deserves the odd Internet purchase!



Wrap the food in newspaper during spring and summer By hiding the food under a couple of layers of newspaper fruit flies etc cannot get at it to lay their eggs. Fruit flies are fine in a wormery, as the young also help eat your waste, but there is something a little off-putting about lifting the wormery lid and having them fly up your nose! The newspaper method helps reduce their numbers.

Empty the sump daily Some people have a container under the tap and leave it open, but the odd worm will escape that way, so I empty the sump daily. During vegetable growing season you will be wanting this precious liquid for feeding your plants and vegetables anyway. It's amazing stuff and will save a fortune on fertilisers. Plus, it's totally organic.

Keep them warm in the winter Worms slow down when it gets cold (they're not happy getting too hot in the summer either) and therefore eat less. Keep an eye on how much they are eating and regulate what you add accordingly, otherwise you will find that they can't cope and as soon as the weather warms up the scraps will start to rot, causing high acidity, smells and possible worm death. Move them to a shed, garage or greenhouse (be careful how hot it gets in the greenhouse though) and they will continue to work over the winter months. If you have nowhere under cover to move them you can wrap the bin in bubble wrap or an old blanket to increase the insulation.

Avoid acidic food stuffs Although worms will eventually eat just about anything—as long as it's organic, so no plastics, metals etc—they don't really like citrus peelings and onions etc. These are a little strong and will cause the acidity of the bin to rise. Compensate for this with finely crushed egg shells or, even better, some Lime Mix (P0162) and Worm Treat (P0219) from Wiggly Wigglers. Added in moderation every couple of weeks or so, this helps keep the wormery in top condition and regulates the pH. In English, this means happy and healthy worms that will be able to work at their best.

Harvesting your Compost

If you are using a tray system, such as the Can-O-Worms or Worm Cafe, and are feeding at a speed the worms can cope with, then the bottom tray should be ready to harvest when the top one is close to full. You can dump the entire tray into your border or compost heap/bin if you like, but if you want to retain the few worms that are still in there then place the bottom tray on the top and leave the lid off. Gently remove the top layer of compost until the worms are uncovered—they hate the light and will bury deeper into the remaining compost—repeat until there is no compost left in the tray and the worms have crawled through the holes into the layer below, which is where most of your food is. Depending on how full that tray is you can either carry on feeding there or just start adding to the new top (empty) tray.

Simon Sherlock

Useful Websites

www.homecomposting.org.uk

Master Composter information

www.transitiontowns.org

Transition Towns information

www.kingsley-st-johns.cheshire.sch.uk

Kingsley St. John's Primary School