

Composting Food Waste

We all try to avoid food waste and particularly cooked food waste, but sometimes this is not possible. While it is not advisable to compost cooked food and dairy at home in a 'cool' composting bin due to attracting vermin, they can be pre-treated to avoid this risk or added to an alternative style of compost bin designed to be rodent proof. The different options are outlined below.

Bins that deal with food waste and produce compost:

HotBin

This extremely well-insulated bin can compost food waste including all cooked foods. The insulation retains heat so well that the addition of fresh material should enable a working temperature of up to 60°C to be maintained. This enhanced working temperature dramatically reduces the processing time and reduces the materials attraction to vermin. It will not cope with large volumes of garden waste in isolation. Used correctly there are no vermin issues.



Green Johanna



A Scandinavian design, this compost bin has a perforated base to keep out rodents. It will deal with any garden or food waste. A good quality bin, which in true Scandinavian tradition arrives flat packed, it is easy to assemble. The bin comes with a removable winter jacket made of foam polyethylene which should be fitted when outdoor temperatures drop consistently below 5°C.

Bins that deal with food waste with no end product:

Green Cone

Technically, this is a food waste digester rather than a compost bin. The part you can see is double skinned and is designed to generate maximum heat. The part you cannot see, buried in the ground, is where the material rots down. The nutrients in the material as it decomposes are taken up by surrounding plants. After 2 or 3 years you would need to empty the contents, which could be added to your compost heap. You must have well drained soil; the Green Cone will not work if the ground is waterlogged. It is an excellent solution for someone not keen on gardening or with limited mobility.



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Bins that pre-treat food waste ready to be added to a standard compost bin:

Bokashi

A Japanese concept, this is an anaerobic process in a sealed container the size of a small waste bin. The process works best with two bins; one maturing while the other is being filled. Special bran inoculated with beneficial microorganisms is sprinkled on each fresh layer of food. As the process is anaerobic the food can be pressed down to squeeze out air and maximise the amount of material. There is a drain tap for the liquid produced, which can be diluted 1:100 and used as a plant food or even a drain cleaner!



In about 8 weeks the contents will be pickled, the smell similar to pickled food. Since the lid is airtight you will only smell the contents when adding material. One advantage of this method is that over winter or during bad weather you do not have to visit the compost bin, emptying it just once every couple of months. The mature contents can be dug into the garden or added to your compost bin. The contents will have been rendered unpalatable to vermin.

Bins that deal with some, but not all, cooked food waste:

Wormery

Wormeries are great for dealing with small amounts of kitchen waste such as peelings, cooked and uncooked scraps, eggshells and even paper, but never bones, meat, fish, dairy and pet faeces. Wormeries are fun and educational for households with children and it produces compost with a high nutrient value. Useful to top up potted plants, hungry feeders and make a mix for mature plants, it should not be used on seedlings, as it is far too nutrient rich. This system also produces a liquid called 'worm wine', which can be diluted 1:10 for use as a plant food. Another advantage of wormeries is that they can keep working over winter when a traditional compost bin/heap will slow down.



Summary

If you are only dealing with food waste then a Green Cone or Bokashi bin could well be the answer. If you have a high proportion of food waste relative to garden waste (or can afford the luxury of having several bins), then the Hotbin is good. If you want a flexible garden waste and food composter that can handle larger quantities, the Green Johanna is a better option. It all depends on the budget available, space limitations, volumes of raw materials and what suits your lifestyle.

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