

# My life in compost

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## **Part 1**

There are many different ways to compost available to all of us, your local council may even offer you reduced rates or, at times, free garden composters including wormeries, wooden bins, express composters, waste digesters, the list goes on! All can be bought in most places and a whole host of them are available from online retailers.

The best and cheapest way to do it is to build your own, regularly put some time in and then appreciate the effect of your hard work with great compost and some free exercise too!

This is my approach developed through trial and error over the years.

I originally tried to get to grips with a wormery, a great idea which seems simple to do, but even for my small family needs, it took a long time to get up to speed and became annoying to not put any acidic foods in. Eventually, after a second tiger worm genocide, I decided to give up and try another technique. This time, the council were giving away free waste digesters.

The idea was simple, dig a big hole in the ground, bury the base and then add the double skinned pyramid top. This digester would break down all of your food waste, including cooked food and it would disappear into the earth. This meant no compost could be taken from the unit, but at least all waste was put back to the earth. Unfortunately for me, we live in a very chalky area. The advice was to therefore dig a bigger hole than was recommended to allow free flow of the broken down food into the earth. This meant I dug a three foot deep whole, three feet wide. Once I had broken through the flint and chalk layer, I had the correct depth. Five hours later, I then had a mass of flint, chalk and soil to then dispose of around the garden to level off the area in preparation for installing. I also realised I had basically dug half of my own grave. I did contemplate carrying on and just dig the whole thing and give up for good, but I'm no quitter! I persisted. I installed the digester as recommended and was ready to digest.

Great, I now had an immobile Dalek in the bottom of my garden, ready to consume all of my family's food waste. Unfortunately, the problem with living over chalk meant that actually the food never really got digested; it just sat at the bottom of my semi-grave and got filled up closer and closer to the "do not fill above line". Soon we were way over it and no downward action happened all summer!

So it was time to bite the bullet, go back to basics and rely on the old fashioned ways. Build one, make it a box, give it a lid and put one next to it. Next month, find out how I did it.

## Part 2

So there I was, frustrated and annoyed, I knew I just had to face facts and put the effort in and go old school. Build a compost heap. Keep it simple and keep it cheap – ideally free and recycled.

I knew what I wanted it to look like. Ideally I'd like two of them, but I only had a small space to put one. Most of our back area was filled with rubbish bins (3), wormery and waste digesters. This left a very limited space, but I had high hopes and big plans. This time, with only my knowledge, skills and tools in my disorganised shed to help me I would build a composter!

I knew I wanted it to be wooden, but where would I get it from? Luckily in my trade, access to wood is generally quite easy. During my weeks of cogitation (things can take me a while to process!) I came upon a stack of pallets. In great condition and looking for a home! With a quick check as to the pallets ownership and with the owner's permission, five of them were quickly put in the back of the truck (another trade bonus!) and rehomed to the back of my garden.

So, armed with the pallets, some fencing posts, a sledge hammer, a hammer and some nails. I was ready to go. I had a quick cup of coffee, cut the posts to 1/3 longer than the pallets, knocked four of them into the ground at the four corners of my compost area (I even used a spirit level to try and get them level!), had a quick cup of coffee, put a pallet at the back, two at each side and nailed them in place. Voila! A compost bin!

But I didn't want to stop there, oh no, if a job's worth doing it's worth having a few luxuries. I knew that this would work fine and start making black gold as soon as I was ready. But I wanted a front and a roof. I wanted the front to be removable so I could have easy access for regular turning with a fork to aerate the pile and speed up the composting process and I wanted a lid to keep the rain off it, keep a little bit of heat in there to speed up the process even more! So after a quick cup of coffee and with a couple of extra post driven in to the ground at each side, just the right width to let the front slide up and out I had a removable front. With a hinge connecting the final pallet to the back one, I finally had the compost bin of my dreams – not that sleeping was an option after all that coffee!

Standing back, looking at the creation, I could see the afternoons work in its full glory. It wasn't pretty but it WOULD DO. Now we could finally reap the benefit of all that wasted food, weeds and dead flowers we no longer needed!

Next month, how I managed my compost heap and what I did next.

### Part 3

So, now I finally had the compost area of my desire, next, I had to get it working for me. Firstly I needed to aerate the pile. The more air in it, the quicker it would break down. So, every couple of weeks, I would take the front off and get my fork and spade out and turn the pile. The spade would be used to break up the bigger bits and the fork for turning the pile. I had a clear space at the front of the composter and would turn it all out on to there and then pile it all back in to the composter, breaking up any larger bits with my spade as I went along.

This was great, every time I turned it I could see the pile breaking down more and more, but I soon came across a problem. How to harvest the compost? If I wanted to get it out I needed to stop adding to it for a while. But what should I do with the food waste whilst the rest is cooking? I had to bite the bullet again and redesign. I needed to extend the compost area and make a double composter. One for “on – the-go” and one for “resting”.

So off I went again. I could simply add another compost bin next to the original one, but, this time I had some different bits of wood left over and this would mean making a different compost bin. The wood I had left over was enough for two bins so I would jolly well start again and make two matching bins! This time I was ably assisted by my four year old son armed with a hammer and a spirit level! He was very good at quality control – ensuring every piece was level and if not giving it a good whack to get it in line!

So the pallets and posts were ripped out and, armed with some spare wood I had lying around, I started again. Same design as before but with two extra posts in the middle to make the extra wall. I again made a sliding door and a hinged roof and threw all the old compost back in to one of the bins. This became my “resting” bin and we then started filling up the other one straight away.

Each bin is now turned every time I have a couple of spare minutes and once the “resting” bin is all broken down, the compost gets distributed around the garden, the “on-the-go” gets rested and we start again.

My journey into the world of compost was complete.

Finally, here are some composting basics I try to stick to:

- Keep a good mix in your compost bin – leaves, grass and weeds are as important as uncooked food waste with the important exception of invasive weeds, weeds with vigorous rhizomes, or weeds which have already set seed, all should be avoided.
- Grass is great in the compost but should be well mixed into the pile.
- Add ripped up paper to add a bit of texture to the pile and leave some air pockets in the heap.

- Most things can be composted but if it is longer than six inches or wider than an inch it will stick around for ages in the pile, so break it up.
- Avoid cooked food, meat and dairy products
- Turn it, turn it, and turn it!