



CHEAT YOUR WHEELIE BIN

Much of what goes into our 'wheelie' bins can be transformed into food for your soil. **John Walker** explains how he does it, and why worms can't get enough of his undies...

Whenever I hold up handfuls of the crumbly, dark brown stuff and invite folk to sniff its earthy deliciousness, I get nodding smiles and whoops of delight. When I lift the lid and show them where it came from, I get faces wrinkled with distaste at the seeming yuckiness of it all. You might have the same reaction looking at this picture taken inside one of my gardens' renewable fuel refineries – better known as a compost bin.

But before you have your own 'yuck' moment and turn to some altogether prettier pages, hear me out: this is all about boosting your plot's productivity and its prettiness,

by feeding its powerhouse – the soil. It's also about using waste to help us garden a little more lightly in the world.

Bin-less living

One comment after a peer into my compost bin is that it resembles the inside of a wheelie bin. That might be true-ish, but my eyebrow-raiser is that I haven't had a wheelie bin for a decade. There was no rumbling bin here when I arrived and I have never longed for one. I recycle rabidly but my overarching motto is this: if it won't rot I recycle it, and if it's not recyclable I pop it, with regret, into a rubbish bin.

Living a bin-less life gets me looking more sharply at what comes into my home and garden (via



My bins sit on the soil but I guard against rodents by sitting them on a sheet of galvanised mesh

shopping bag or post) and what happens to it next – whether it's pizza packaging, the box some plug plants came in, or a pair of my worn-out cotton Y-fronts. The fill-it-and-forget-it mentality that wheelie bins tempt is also long gone.

We often have separate wheelie bins for specific purposes: one for garden/green waste, one for general waste and possibly one (and/or boxes) for recyclable stuff, plus perhaps a caddy for cooked food waste. I've used the word 'waste' three times. Swap it for 'resources' and your whole outlook will change; think 'valuable materials to help me nourish my soil' and you'll not look back. I can hear a whole new catchphrase: love soil, hate waste.

Will it rot?

Not everything that comes into our homes is potential soil-food. Glass, plastics and metals defy the most ardent composters, but they're still valuable resources which can go on to be recycled again and again.

But the rest – garden, kitchen and household resources – are rich pickings for conversion. Any material that was once living has the



One of my compost bins a few weeks after setting up and about to receive its kick-start of composting worms

potential to be transformed, with a little help from mostly unseeable but also some very obvious soil life into crumbly, brown compost. To pass my rot test, anything that goes into my compost bins must, 12 to 18 months after the bin is full, be unrecognisable. If it still has shape and form by then, it's probably not going to rot much at all. Toughie exceptions such as avocado skins/stones can simply be crushed and added to the mix when you start up a new bin.

'Greens' and 'browns'

Like making a good cake, making wheelie bin-cheating compost relies on the mixing together of the correct ingredients. My proven recipe is simple: each time you add fresh material to your bin, make it a 50:50 mixture of 'greens' and 'browns'.

Greens are softer, sappier materials containing water (they're not always green in colour), which can be anything from weeds to vegetable peelings. Browns are tougher, drier materials which tend to rot more slowly and mop up excess moisture; think toilet roll tubes and newspaper. Don't worry if you stray off the 50:50 now and then, but never

KNOW YOUR GREENS AND BROWNS

Greens

- Vegetable and fruit peelings/trimmings, banana skins, apple cores
- Tea leaves/bags and coffee grounds
- Weed leaves, stems and roots (but not those of tough perennial weeds)
- Fading leaves and any spoiled fruits/blooms from crops
- Chopped-up stinging nettles and comfrey leaves
- Soft and sappy hedge trimmings
- Old bedding plants (cut up with secateurs)
- Faded cut flowers
- Lawn mowings

Browns

- Woody (non-thorny) prunings and evergreen hedge clippings
- Tough (chopped-up) stems of weeds, herbaceous plants and vegetables
- Scrunched cereal boxes, flour bags and similar food packaging (check for plastic coatings, which won't rot)
- Cardboard – wet it first so you can tear it up
- Torn or shredded newspaper
- Paper envelopes (remove plastic windows)
- Used paper kitchen towels and tissues
- Occasional handfuls of autumn leaves
- Toilet/kitchen roll tubes
- Straw and hay



IMAGE COURTESY OF HOW TO CREATE AN ECO GARDEN: THE PRACTICAL GUIDE TO GREENER, PLANET-FRIENDLY GARDENING (AQUAMARINE £14.99)

overdose your bin on greens (such as lawn mowings) or they'll produce a slimy, bad-smelling mass – which really is yucky.

I stick doggedly to my 50:50 rule. If there are way more greens than browns (usually during summer and autumn) I simply add the excess to a heap of more general mixed garden waste – sorry, resources – elsewhere. Otherwise, this system works a treat all year round. Even in winter there are ample post-mealtime greens to mix with a constant supply of household browns.

As an extra safeguard against your bin getting wet and whiffy, scrunch as many browns as you can before adding them. Cereal and cardboard food/

egg boxes, as well as boxes used to send young plants and seeds, can be crushed into loose, ball-shaped clumps. Your scrunchings introduce air into the mix, help keep it open and create the perfect habitat for the creature that adds real magic to this kind of composting.

Worm magic

Once I've got my 50:50 mixture right it's time for my wheelie-cheating composting to go live and, for that, I need some worms. Not the pale, sluggish earthworms that mine and refine our soil, but the thrashing, orange/red, pale-striped compost worms (often called brandlings or tiger worms) which live naturally in decaying organic matter. Compost worms will munch their way through just about anything that will rot, whether it's a scrunched muesli packet, a baked potato skin, or a used napkin from the local cafe.

Compost worms will eventually find their way into your bin (unless it's on a hard surface a long way from any soil). After I've been adding to it for a few weeks, I like to give my bin a kick-start by introducing a



With the bin removed, you can see the composting process in all its glory. At the top is the fresher mix of greens and browns

Organic gardening

couple of handfuls of worms. I relocate them from near the top of the bin I'm about to empty. If you're a first-time wheelie-cheater, ask a friend who makes good compost, or root around in some rotting manure.

When you add your worms, sprinkle in a few handfuls of compost too, taken either from a full bin, or from anywhere in the garden where some organic matter has collected and rotted down. This will charge your mixture with all the invisible bugs, fungi, bacteria and other microorganisms which work in tandem with your worms. After that, it's all systems rot.



TOP TIP

I 'feed' my compost bins year-round. By standing them on soil the worms can retreat underground if a freeze sets in

If you open the lid and put your ear to the bin you can hear them hard at work...

Food from scraps

Being a frugally-minded vegetarian, I find this kind of waste-busting composting a breeze. My bins can cope with small amounts of stale bread, pasta and cheese. But if you do have uneaten food to deal with, including meat and fish, there are two choices. Either get a wormery to convert your food scraps into soil food (redeploy some of your bin-living worms), or put them out for collection (most food waste is now composted to exacting standards, with the resulting compost often available to gardeners).



Fast feeders

Compost worms are brightly coloured and lively. In spring, summer and autumn you can expect a population explosion as they feed on a bin's contents. When masses of worms gather around the top of my bins, I take the lid off and prop it open overnight, allowing some worms to move out. You won't always see your feasting army (unless you lift the top layers). But if you open the lid and put your ear to the bin, on a quiet evening, you can hear them hard at work...

Cool, slow and simple

The best thing about making soil food this way is how straightforward it is. I use simple 'dalek' type bins made from recycled plastic, with lids that push on/off. I don't do any turning or mixing and the bins don't heat up. This is cool, slow composting driven by the gentle passage of time. When a bin is full, I top it with a layer of dead leaves and let it be for up to 18 months. If it's left any longer, what comes out is even better. I stand



my bins on soil so that the worms can retreat into it should they need to, such as when the bin freezes solid in winter.

Some compost is used to make a peat-free potting mix – a 50:50 mix of sieved compost and three-year-old leafmould. In my trials these pak choi made extensive root systems

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I wasn't kidding about my Y-fronts: they go into this mix, too, along with occasional pairs of cotton or wool socks, the odd holey cotton T-shirt and worn-out cotton gardening gloves (don't try and compost synthetic fibres). I do have to fish out a few elasticated bands at sieving time, but it's good to know that even my undies are helping to feed the world. The world underground, that is.

The end result

This is some sieved, earthy stuff that comes from my landfill-defying compost bins 12-18 months after they're full. All that is recognisable is a few fragments of eggshell. What makes this compost extra special is that it's made up of not just rotted materials but worm casts, which are rich in plant nutrients and natural growth boosters. I use it in DIY potting mixes and to feed my soil. Because it's super-charged with worm casts, a couple of scooped handfuls to the square metre (or square yard) is ample. 🌱