

Composting

CHRONICLE

Autumn/Winter 2016

Hello and welcome to another edition of the Composting Chronicle. With summer now behind us, thoughts turn to autumn and, with it, one of the big landmarks of the season – Halloween.

Every year millions of pumpkins go to waste; first the flesh is carved out and thrown away then, after brief service as a lantern, the rest follows it into landfill. We think that's a dreadful waste so we've got some ideas for using the flesh and tips on how to compost the rest.

Also, we've got an article on making liquid plant foods, a report from the Garden Organic's annual volunteers' conference, news of an initiative to help you reduce your food waste (even if you do compost it) and a training exercise that turned into a brand new composter and a crop of strawberries for one of our volunteers.

Finally – because it always comes around – we've got a few hints to help you keep composting over the festive season and afterwards.

As always, we'd like to thank everyone who contributed material for this edition. If you've got any queries, comments or suggestions for future editions please send them in to wasteprevention@leics.gov.uk



Halloween: The Festival of Food Waste



By Rod Weston, Leicestershire Master Composter

It is estimated that in the UK up to four million pumpkins are bought to carve and display over Halloween with the edible flesh being discarded as waste and ending up with most of the lanterns in landfill. This produces approximately 18,000 tons of landfill waste directly attributable to the Halloween festivities.

Much of this waste is due to people being unaware that the flesh discarded when carving the pumpkin can be eaten and how versatile it is. On this basis, farmers are growing acres of food just for it to be thrown away.

While the most common variety of pumpkin grown for Halloween carving may not provide as much flavour as those grown specifically for eating (and there are a large number of very tasty squashes and pumpkins suitable for home and allotment

growing), all have flesh high in fibre and beta-carotene that should not be wasted.

To help reduce this waste and save money Love Food Hate Waste publishes a range of recipes, which can be found on the [Love Food Hate Waste Website](#)

In recent years, the environmental charity Hubbub has organised Pumpkin Rescue events to increase awareness of pumpkins as a food and a composting resource rather than just Halloween decorations.

For more information go to <http://www.hubbub.org.uk/>



Composting Pumpkins

As composters, we can at least deal with the remains of lanterns at home, in schools or those grown for allotment and village Biggest Pumpkin competitions as part of our efforts to reduce waste sent to landfill.

In composting terms, pumpkins are classified as Greens, being high in nitrogen, and will rot down to produce compost in six to nine months. Before starting to compost those used as lanterns all items used to decorate it should be removed e.g. candles, wax, aluminium foil etc. If a cold composting technique is to be used remove any remaining seeds otherwise they may germinate in the bin or when the compost is used. If the pumpkin has been treated with a preservative to prolong its use as a lantern those parts that have been treated should not be composted.

The larger the surface area exposed to the composting microorganisms, the more quickly it will be broken down so the normal advice is to smash or cut the pumpkin into small pieces. Some sources suggest that smashing a pumpkin with a hammer is part of the fun for children; however, I prefer to use the back of a spade as it is quicker, easier and produces more of an easily composted "mush".

The remains of the pumpkin can then be added to the compost bin and covered with a layer of Browns, such as shredded paper or cardboard, to maintain the Greens/Browns balance and to discourage flies and other pests.

Pumpkins can also be composted in a wormery and are given by some sources as one of the favourite worm foods. The worms prefer their pumpkin soft and in small pieces. Therefore, after smashing the pumpkin, if any large pieces have survived the smashing they should be chopped using a kitchen knife.

As one of the main causes of worm death in a wormery is overfeeding, the amount of pumpkin given to the worms should be rationed, with the pumpkin being divided between that which will be used immediately, that being used within a week, which can be stored in the fridge, and the rest, which can be frozen. Freezing not only helps avoid overfeeding the worms, it also provides a stock of suitable food for the winter months it also softens the pumpkin making it easier for the worms to eat.

If you do not have a wormery, a compost bin or a heap but do have a garden, it is still possible to compost pumpkin. Dig a shallow pumpkin grave in a shady part of the garden, make a bed of vegetable leaves, peelings and other compostable materials and place the smashed pumpkin on this bed. Cover it with soil or compostable materials such as wood chip, sawdust or leaves. This is a variation on the traditional trench composting technique. Some sources suggest including fallen autumn leaves in the bed upon which the remains of the pumpkin are tipped. However, if the covered compost trench is to be used next year to grow more pumpkins or other vegetables this can be counterproductive as some leaves contain growth inhibitors that will affect the growth of pumpkins and other plants or be of the wrong pH. I would avoid using leaves and, if possible, turn them into leaf mould.

A variation on this technique is to put the pumpkins in an old dustbin, smash them using a shovel, and then add leaves to the container mixing well before spreading in a depression in the ground. Using this technique, you can build a garden mini-windrow adding alternate layers of hay, leaves and uncooked vegetable food waste together with cardboard and other compostable material. The pile is then soaked with water. The windrow is then covered with a black polythene sheet or tarpaulin and left to decompose. More information on this technique can be found at the [Red Worm Composting](#) website.





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Liquid Feeds

By Carrie Pailthorpe
Public Health Analyst, Leicestershire County Council
(Formerly Senior Horticultural Advisor,
Garden Organic)



Comfrey being harvested to make liquid feeds

You may know that organic gardeners often grow comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*) and add it to the compost heap. But did you know it's also an essential ingredient for your own home-made liquid feeds?

It's easy to make and so much cheaper than buying from the garden centre; even if you buy organic feeds, there's still the plastic packaging and transportation adding to the carbon footprint of these products. This way you can make your own virtually carbon-free feeds.

Comfrey feed can be made in two ways. The first is to fill a lidded container with comfrey – leaves, stems, flowers and all – then cover it with water. Pop the lid on and leave to rot for a few weeks, then strain and use undiluted. Alternatively, a concentrate can be made from leaving out the water, weighing the green matter down with a

brick and leaving it to rot. This method takes a little longer but uses smaller containers and less space. If you're very fancy, you can assemble a comfrey column.

Stuff the drain pipe with your comfrey and weigh down with a water-filled plastic pop bottle (tie something to the top of it so you can pull it back out). Add a filter and collecting vessel underneath and wait for the rich dark feed to slowly drip from the bottom.

Dilute the finished liquid about 10:1 – it's not an exact science and I do it by eye, looking for something the colour of a decent pot of tea. The feed is rich in potash so ideal for tomatoes and any plants where you want to encourage flowering and/or fruiting – I use it on roses, figs, and dahlias.

This will work with any variety of comfrey, but the common *S. officinale* can self-seed rather prolifically, so if you're planting fresh, rather than foraging what's already growing, go for the Russian

continued...

comfrey *S. x uplandicum*. In the 60s, Lawrence Hills, founder of Garden Organic (www.gardenorganic.org.uk) experimented to find the best variety for making plant feed – he developed Bocking 14 as the ideal variety and it's available from The [Organic Gardening Catalogue](#) and other online suppliers.

Once you've mastered making liquid feeds, there are lots of other plants that can also be used this way. Nettles are commonly used in exactly the same way – the resulting feed is rich in nitrogen and better suited for encouraging leafy growth. Mix comfrey and nettles together for a balanced feed – either make the feeds separately, then mix; or add both plants at the initial stage.

In fact, any non-woody plant could be used this way, but the nutrient value of nettles and comfrey has been well-researched and established whereas other plants will be a bit more experimental. Something like bindweed is a good example – dunk the plant, roots and all in a bucket of water for several weeks to make sure it's really, really dead, then use the resulting liquid as a general feed. If you have no current use for the feed, add the whole lot – rotted leaves, roots and water – to your compost heap.



Comfrey column in situ



Spread the word

Become an expert in composting and raise awareness of its benefits.

Find out more about master composters at www.lesswaste.org.uk/master_composter or call 0116 305 7005.



How much food do you really waste?

By Matt Copley, Senior Environment and Waste Management Technician

Wasting food is almost universally seen as a bad thing, yet it's something we all do to some degree. The question is, to what degree? How much food do you actually waste? Statistics suggest that many people throw away more food than they are aware of, or perhaps more than they care to admit.

Research by WRAP (the Waste and Resources Action Programme) who monitor food waste in the UK suggests that people who home compost are likely to have a greater than average awareness of the damaging environmental and financial impacts of wasting food. Composting is undeniably one of the most environmentally friendly ways of disposing of uncooked vegetable wastes from the kitchen, and home composting is certainly cheaper than sending the food to landfill. Home composting is a great thing to do, and the dedicated householders and allotment keepers who collectively compost over half a million tonnes of food waste each year in the UK should be applauded! (Ref 1)

However, at the point that food is disposed of – whether in a landfill site or composted – 90% of the environmental (and financial) damage has already been done. Composting food waste at home therefore does not offer a “get out of goal free” card and food waste prevention should be more of a priority for everyone. This is especially true of home composters who may well feel that they are already doing their bit for the environment, and might therefore lack the



motivation to take further steps to improve their food waste performance.

To help everyone get a better idea of how much food they are actually wasting, and to promote food waste prevention, Leicestershire County Council recently launched a Food Waste Challenge. The Challenge asks participants to keep a food waste diary for a period of two weeks, an action which is proven to help people gain a better understanding of, and opportunity to address, the behaviours and habits which cause them to waste food. Leicestershire residents who complete the challenge can enter themselves into a prize draw to win items which will further help them to reduce food waste in their household.

<http://www.lesswaste.org.uk/food-waste-challenge/>



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LEICESTERSHIRE

FOOD WASTE CHALLENGE

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To take it on!



Designing your own composter

As part of their induction training, Master Composters work in groups to design their ideal composter. Often, these are flights of fancy with every possible gizmo attached and remain as sketches on a piece of flipchart paper.

However, after her training weekend in March, new recruit Karen Busko from Barwell decided to turn her group's design into reality and built this in her back garden.

With doors built into the base, sweet peas planted at the side and strawberries at the front, this is an effective design, aesthetically pleasing and was still producing fruit into September.

Karen has now been asked to build a similar composter at her local allotments and is looking forward to harvesting her first compost in the spring.



Garden Organic Community Volunteers Conference

By Kate Newman, Master Composter Project Co-ordinator, Garden Organic

Every year, Leicestershire Master Composters join colleagues from across the country as Garden Organic invites the charity's volunteer Masters & Buddies to join them in celebrating another inspirational year of spreading the word on organic food growing, food preparation and home composting.

This year over 120 passionate and dedicated volunteers descended on the gardens. The day kicked off with welcomes from the Head of Sustainable Communities and Chief Executive who both thanked them for their invaluable contribution to the work of the charity, and the life-changing impact they have.

Shortly after, the fun really began! Delegates were herded off into rooms to take part in a number of workshops and activities. A diverse range of subjects were covered, including how to grow mushrooms in coffee grounds, natural dyeing, the secret life of compost and learning how to fit bread-making into busy lives.

For many, the highlight of the day came after lunch, when visitors were treated to three first-rate speakers...

Chris Collins, Garden Organic's recently appointed Head of Organic Horticulture entertained the audience with his advice on the 15 minutes of plant care all gardeners should introduce into their



daily routines. Chris was followed by Anthony Roach of Earth Watch, who spoke about the Earthworm Watch project he's working on. Anthony introduced the audience to the many virtues of the humble earthworm, and encouraged them to take part in this nationwide survey.

Finally, Mark Ridsdill-Smith (aka the Vertical Veg man) talked through some of his favourite growing spaces and gave the audience valuable tips on how to make the most of every little growing space available.

For the team at Garden Organic the event is always one of the highlights of the year - spending time with such vibrant, energetic and enthusiastic volunteers sets us up for the darker winter months!

Xmas Composting Tips

You can keep composting all through the bleak midwinter – insulating your bin with bubble wrap or a bit of old carpet will help keep it warm and active

Don't forget to put all your vegetable peelings in your compost bin this Christmas

Scrunched-up (non-shiny) wrapping paper and torn-up cardboard are a good addition to your bin to balance out all the extra vegetable peelings

A kitchen caddy or a lidded bucket near the back door can cut down on trips to the bin when it's cold & dark

Once Xmas is over, you can put in home-made paper decorations that have passed their best.

If you get a sprout tree, cut the stalk into small pieces before it goes into the compost bin so they break down more quickly

Finally, at the end of it all, if you had a real tree, that can be composted too. Unless you've got a garden shredder it'll probably be too much for home composting but if it's not covered in fake snow and the trunk is less than 6" in diameter you can take it to your local Recycling & Household Waste Site. Just make sure you take the decorations off first!