

Homemade Food Scrap Digester



Properly composted food scraps can be turned into an excellent fertilizer for gardens. However, composting food scraps in an open pile or mixed with yard waste can attract some unwanted urban pests—rats, mice, raccoons and opossums! Here's how to easily make your own pest-proof food waste digester that will avoid pest problems.

Making the Digester and Getting Started

One of the simplest ways to compost food scraps is in a sunken garbage can. The can should have a tight fitting lid and holes punched on the sides and in the bottom. A galvanized metal can (about \$20 to \$30 new) works well (plastic should be avoided). Drill or punch about 20 drain holes, $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch diameter, in the bottom of the can. Drill 20 more holes in the sides of the can, but only in the lower third, which will be covered by soil. If the lid is not tight, make a lid out of a piece of plywood, with a handle on top and some wood blocks underneath to fit the lip of the can and help hold the lid on. A bungee cord can be knotted to the lid handle and the bungee hooks fastened to the can handles, securing the lid.

In a well-drained spot, dig a hole about 15 inches deep (about half as deep as your container) and set the can into the hole. Then, push the soil back in around the sides and tamp it down with your foot or a shovel.

Your new digester is ready to use!

Collect food scraps, storing them in a container in your kitchen, and once or twice a week, throw the food scraps into the Food Scrap Digester. If odor or fruit flies are a problem, you can stockpile bags of brown leaves, coarse sawdust, straw, or shredded paper near the digester and use the material to place a thin layer on top of each new food scrap addition to the digester. No worms need to be added to this digester. Worms will find their way into the digester through the holes and will help break down the food scraps.

Harvesting the Compost

Depending on your household's food habits, a digester will fill in 6-12 months. Harvest the compost by shoveling the upper foot or so of undecomposed food off to one side and shoveling the dark, soil-like compost out of the bottom of the digester. If the unfinished compost is wet and smelly, mix it with some soil and wait a week for it to turn drier and sweet smelling. Return the top layer (which was set aside) back into the digester to finish composting and continue to add food scraps. You can also bury the top layer of undecomposed food in a trench at least one foot deep in the garden, making more room for food scraps in the digester. While harvesting compost from your digester, watch out for the jagged metal around drainage and air holes.

If you want completely finished, non-smelly compost, we recommend installing *two* digesters. When one digester gets full, just start using the second digester. After 6-12 months, all the compost in the first digester will be finished and ready to harvest and use.



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Using Compost

The most common uses of compost are as mulch on established plants, as a soil amendment at planting time, and in potting mixes. Food scrap compost contains more nutrients than yard waste compost, and should be used more sparingly. It can be applied as a one-inch mulch around plants or up to two inches can be dug into garden soil. For a potting mix, add up to 20% food scrap compost to a commercial or homemade potting mix.

Trouble Shooting

Here are some common problems and how to fix them:

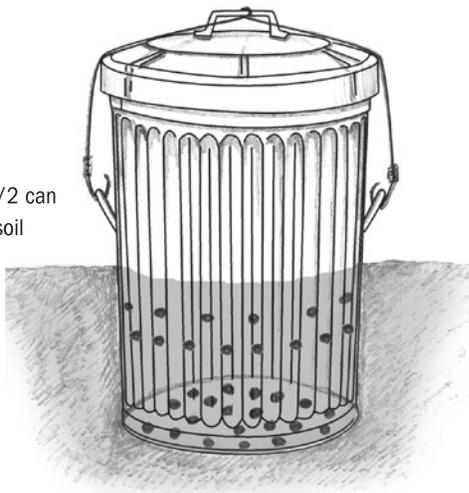
Odors and fruit flies

Stir in leaves or coarse sawdust to keep the food scraps aerobic. Cover fresh food scraps with leaves, coarse sawdust, straw or shredded newspaper to exclude fruit flies. If you prefer to use grass clippings as a covering material, first leave them in the sun to dry out and turn brown. Once a healthy worm population is established in the digester, they will help reduce odors by aerating the food scraps. Always keep the lid closed and on tight.

Raccoons, opossums or dogs knock the lid off

It's important to keep the lid on your digester closed to keep rodents out. Place a rock on the lid or tie a bungee cord to the lid handle and attach the bungee hooks to the handles on the sides of the garbage can to hold the lid on. And be sure to keep meat scraps out! They smell bad and attract animals, so it is better to put the meat, fish, poultry, dairy and oily food scraps in the garbage.

Bury 1/2 can
in the soil



DO Compost

- Vegetable scraps
- Grains and pasta
- Fruit rinds and peels
- Breads
- Coffee grounds, filters
- Tea bags
- Paper napkins, towels
- Eggshells

DON'T Compost

- Meat
- Fish and poultry
- Cheese
- Oily foods
- Butter
- Dairy products
- Other animal products
- Pet waste

More on Natural Yard Care:

To receive the Naturals Guides: *Composting at Home*, or *Building Healthy Soil* or for more information on composting please call the Natural Lawn & Garden Hotline at 206.633.0224 or email them at: lawn&gardenhotline@seattletilth.org

More resources can also be viewed at these websites:

www.ci.seattle.wa.us/util/composting
www.cityofseattle.net/util/rescons/
www.savingwater.org
www.compostwashington.org/

This and other compost bin plans can be found at:

www.seattletilth.org/download/download.html
www.dnr.metrokc.gov.swd/ResRecy/composting/composting/shtml