

Homemade Food Digester



Properly composted food scraps can be turned into an excellent boost 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 you own pest-proof food waste digester that will avoid pest problems.

Making the Digester

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 works well (plastic should be avoided).

Drill or punch about 20 drain holes, $\frac{1}{2}$ 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.

To secure the lid, you can knot a bungee cord to the lid handle and fasten the bungee hooks to the can handles.

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 around the sides and tamp it down with your foot or a shovel.

Getting Started

Your new digester is ready to use! Collect food scraps, storing them in a container in your kitchen. 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 each time you add food scraps to the digester. No worms need to be added to this digester. Worms, insects and microbes will enter through the holes and will help break down the food scraps.

Harvesting the Compost

Depending on your household's food habits, a digester will get full in 6-12 months. Harvest the compost by shoveling the upper foot or so of un-decomposed food off to one side and digging 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 dry out. It should be sweet smelling. Return the top layer that had been set aside back into the digester to finish composting. Continue to add food scraps. You can also bury the top layer of un-decomposed food in a trench in the garden, at least one foot deep, 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, 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.

Using Compost

The most common uses of compost are as mulch around established plants, as a soil amendment when planting 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.

Troubleshooting

Here are some common problems and how to fix them:

Odors and fruit flies

Mix 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 have an abundance of grass clippings, 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 tightly.

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. 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 or yard

waste container (depending on your collection services). Be sure to bury half the 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 and other dairy products
- Other animal products
- Pet waste

