

Indoor composting system Bokashi turns food waste into a resource

Strange and wonderful things have been growing in Denise Holloway's Abu Dhabi garden since she started using Bokashi, a simple home composting system, last September.

Standing in the sandy soil on a recent morning, the Canadian mother of one gestures to random spots where the earth has turned dark and rich. «When I clean out the bucket, I put it there and over there. I ended up with all these delicious feral tomatoes.»

Pointing to some more greenery in the corner, she says: «This is a mango that went into the Bokashi, and then I've got these coming up, and I don't know what they are.»

Inside her kitchen, the only sign that she composts is a pot on a far counter with an aerated lid. Inside are her family of three's most recent peels and pits. Later she transfers them to one of two out-of-sight beige Bokashi buckets, each made from recycled plastic. She pries off one of their tight-fitting green lids, revealing an interior almost full with old food. «See, it doesn't stink,» she says. «This has been sitting here for three weeks.»

The system works by alternating layers of scraps and leftover food - even meat, eggshells, bones and seafood can go in - followed by a layer of Bokashi bran. The bran mixture includes wheat bran, sawdust, sugarcane blackstrap molasses, mineral rock salt and microbes, which are activated when they come in contact with the moisture from food. Not only is the food fermented, but the probiotic nature of the mixture also means it neutralises pathogens as well.

Every few days the Bokashi produces a brown, slightly fermented-smelling liquid, which Denise accesses by turning a spout at the bottom of the bucket. She mixes about a quarter cup with 10 litres of water and uses it to fertilise her garden out back. «What I like is it turns waste into a resource,» she says. «It ends up being really good for your garden.»

Holloway cooks almost all her family's meals from scratch and entertains frequently, so she can fill a Bokashi in as little as a week or 10 days. When that happens, she takes it out to the garden, digs a small hole and buries the contents.

EARTH MATTERS: Special coverage

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To mark Earth Week, The National directs its focus on the environment, highlighting the need for education and attention to the needs of our planet.

In addition to occasional rogue produce, it takes about a month to break down into a rich, dark soil. Grabbing a handful, Denise points out a fragment of an avocado peel and a bean sprout.

«Smell that,» she says. «It's the sweetest smell. It's like earth.»

Holloway tried to compost before, cutting food up into bits and burying it. She has since gone from composting about 40 per cent of the family's food

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and garden waste and scraps to virtually all of it - satisfying her aim to send as little waste to landfill as possible.

«It think it's a really good exercise,» she says. «It gets you in contact with your waste. You just shouldn't be irresponsible. You should be responsible and know what you're throwing out.»

There are more than 500 Bokashis now in use in the UAE, distributed in the two years since the Bokashi Dubai business partners Jo Marengo and Janine Sheard started making them available. They cost Dh300 per unit, with an additional cost of Dh20 per delivery. A one-kilogram bag of Bokashi bran costs Dh80 and lasts for several months. Visit www.bokashidubai.com for more information.

Tips for using the Bokashi

Bin

Find a convenient home for your Bokashi bin. It has to be indoors, so obvious options might be under the kitchen sink or the kitchen counter.

Place

Put the supplied drain plate at the foot of your bin to allow excess liquid to drain off. Sprinkle a thin layer of Bokashi onto the drain plate.

Grain

Store the Bokashi grain within an airtight container, in a cool, dark place.

Layer

Add food waste to the bin as you produce it. This can include anything from vegetable scraps, egg shells and meat to tea bags and small amounts of paper. Waste should be added in 3-4cm layers and immediately compressed to remove any air pockets. Sprinkle a small handful of Bokashi over the waste until the entire surface area is exposed to the grain.

Fill

Continue this layering process until the bin is full.

Seal

Don't forget to seal the airtight lid carefully after opening the bin.

Drain

Drain the liquid from the bin once or twice a week. This can be diluted at a ratio of 1:100 (liquid to water) and used to fertilise lawns and plants. Undiluted liquid can be used to clear drains and septic systems.

Empty

Once the bin is full, place the contents into a hole or trench in the garden. The material needs to go into the soil before it can turn into humus.

Repeat

Wash the bin with water and restart the process.

Results

In two or three weeks the waste buried in your garden will have broken down into a rich, nutrient-filled, naturally produced soil.

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