

VEGGIE MIGHT

From sandpit to verdant veggies in just a few months? Hayley MacDonald shows us how



Whoever says nothing grows in Dubai needs to check out Hayley MacDonald's garden. Transforming what was, only last August, a dusty patch of sand, this enterprising fan of all things natural (Hayley is founder of the online organic store www.besupernatural.com) has virtually fed herself and her husband all winter with delicious greens and vegetables cultivated in her own back garden.

In a city where it's tempting to throw money at expensive landscaping, Hayley and James have created their own private farm at Jumeirah Village Circle on a tiny budget and doing all the hard graft themselves.

Committed conservationists and advocates of all things natural, the couple use the Bokashi compost system, which recycles vegetable peelings, teabags, coffee grounds, cooking leftovers and even bones (see page 115 for more on this). They crank up their composting over the summer to create a wealth of nutrient-rich soil, even when the weather would have it otherwise.

"We collected bags of food waste and mixed it with Bokashi bran, which ferments the waste and releases microorganisms to enhance the process," Hayley explains. "We then mixed that with organic potting soil to create a beautiful 'living' soil to feed our plants. We dug holes and filled them with our Bokashi waste and just planted from there." ▶

WORDS: KAREN ILEY IMAGES: RICHARD TAYLOR





Hayley's vegetable-growing tips

Don't think that you need to have a sprawling garden to grow your own veg. Hayley used to grow all sorts in her apartment. Follow her tips to cultivate your own...

- Save all your seeds. Gardening does not need to be expensive. Wash the seeds from organic produce, leave to dry and then plant!
- You can grow food anywhere – the only limits are in your head! Think outside the box: replace standard house plants with chillies, herbs, greens, cucumbers and tomatoes. All are very easy to grow inside.
- Save your empty toilet rolls; you can use them as seedling pods. You'll get a nice long tap root and can pop the whole thing straight in the ground or in a pot without disturbing or upsetting the plant.
- Say no to chemical fertilisers and use Bokashi instead.
- Use mulch (wood chips), which looks lovely but, more importantly, protects the surface of your 'living' soil and saves water loss through evaporation.
- Remember, there are no such things as green fingers! We all have successes and failures; but, if you have a passion for growing things, you will be successful.



BEFORE



AFTER



► In just a few short months, the results of her "massive seed bomb" (she simply threw a load of seeds on her compost to see what would grow) were beginning to show. "Some of it has worked, some hasn't, but there's nothing in this garden that can't be eaten or used in medicine." From holy basil ("it's very good for your digestive system") to tiny marble-sized red and yellow chillies ("those babies will blow your head off") and rampant mustard seeds, it's been a categorical success.

"We've managed to feed ourselves all winter," says Hayley, showing us around her broccoli, kale and chicory plants. A vegetarian who describes herself as "a bit of a juice fiend", Hayley tries to eat raw wherever possible, and hasn't had to buy any greens this season. "It's been a constant cycle. Because we're using the Bokashi system, we're replenishing the soil all the time and getting layers and layers of vegetables. It's a

DIY DINNERS

Hayley's garden provided all the greens her and her husband needed for winter. The fruits (and herbs and veggies) of her labours include mint, broccoli, pak choi and tomatoes (all pictured)



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bit of a surprise what you're going to get but, look, I've just pulled out that mustard plant and there are capsicums growing underneath. I don't even remember planting those!"

From pak choi to aubergines, tomatoes to courgettes and lemon balm to mint and basil, the entire garden is a testament to natural farming and permaculture. Hayley uses no pesticides or chemicals. Any bugs and beasts are firmly dealt with by a smattering of pungent species such as marigolds and garlic, whose strong smells deter the pesky blighters. "We're letting the chicory go to seed now so that it attracts bees, which

What is Bokashi?

- Bokashi is a kitchen composting system that recycles your food waste – peelings, tea bags, egg shells, even dairy products, meat and small bones – into organic compost within three to five weeks.
- The Bokashi system uses a recycled plastic bucket and thin layers of bran infused with effective microorganisms to pickle the kitchen waste, acting as a compost accelerator.
- The airtight lid seals the container, ensuring an odourless anaerobic fermentation process rather than decay.
- The drained liquid is a powerful plant food and drain cleaner, teeming with microbes and nutrients. It can be diluted and used directly on indoor and outdoor plants or poured down drainage outlets to remove odours and scum.
- Once the bin is full, the fermented material can either be added to your outdoor compost bin or buried straight into your garden soil.



A 20 litre Bokashi bin costs Dhs280 and a 1kg bag of Bokashi bran Dhs80. Both are available from Bokashi Dubai (www.bokashidubai.com)

pollinate the flowers. If you attract bigger bugs such as ladybirds and bees, it keeps the little bugs, like greenfly, at bay – and they're the ones that cause the problems."

The garden is full of peas and beans, which draw nitrogen into the earth, creating a healthy soil and acting as a natural fertiliser for the rest of the plants. She also practises 'companion planting'. "It may sound daft, but plants don't like to be by themselves. They do better when they have other varieties around them. Our mango tree was half dead when we bought it but, by planting it alongside fennel, mustard, chillies and peas, it's really recovered. The baby mangoes sometimes get blown away in the wind, but at one point we reckoned we had around Dhs2,000-worth of mangoes on that tree!"

Hayley's garden is 'going to seed' at the moment – in the most positive sense. "I let one or two plants from each variety go to seed, then I won't have to buy more seeds for next season," she explains. The hot summer months will be less fruitful, of course, but she's ready for another bountiful harvest in the autumn. ♦