



A CRAVING FOR compost

By Karen Iley

Oooh, compost! I'm a woman possessed! It used to be handbags and high heels that got the blood pumping, but these days I'm far more likely to get into a spin over my festering food leftovers than I am about the latest arm candy. Why? Well I'm shocked by the amount of food waste our small household generates, I'm seriously worried about the chemicals and pesticides in our produce and, since venturing over to the dark side of 40, I've discovered a slightly alarming desire to potter in the garden and 'grow my own' (yes, even in the desert). Certain friends and family are raising eyebrows (they reckon I'm turning into a batty old crone destined to spend her days cultivating catnip) but it's not just me who's addicted. Read on to discover why anyone, whether they have a teensy balcony or a sprawling acreage, could – and should – get into composting...

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Clockwise from left: Rose with a sapling grown from organic orange pips; thriving tomato seedlings; burying the Bokashi

KAREN'S TERRACE

"I took delivery of my Bokashi bin about two months ago, but so I'm very much in the early stages, yet already I'm seriously addicted. To briefly explain the Bokashi process, you layer your food waste – peelings, leftovers, egg shells, bones, the lot – in your bin and sprinkle it with Bokashi bran, an organic mix of good bacteria and microbes that 'pickles' your food waste at home rather than letting it rot in a landfill. From the start, I saw a dramatic reduction in our kitchen rubbish and, after just four days, my half-full Bokashi bin was producing lovely juice that can be drained off in a tap. It may smell yucky (I keep mine in a well-sealed old milk bottle) but diluted, it makes a fabulous plant food. About a week later, my bin was full, so I siphoned off the rest of the liquid and set about burying the contents in the 'garden' (in our case, a patio and a patch of artificial grass).

I lifted a corner of turf, dug a hole, chucked it in and covered it with sand. So far so good, but because I replaced the turf, my compost didn't get enough air. Instead of breaking down into a lovely hummus – a process that takes three to six weeks – I ended up with a slightly soggy soil. It was still usable though, and my re-planted frangipani trees are thriving in their lovely new, nutrient-rich pots, but for subsequent bins, I'm going to switch to Leah's 'balcony bin' system (see p106). The house plants are blooming on their Bokashi diet and we're enjoying experimenting with all sorts of greenery (think tomatoes, chillies, basil varieties, mustard, lemon grass, salad leaves and teeny little orange and lemon plants). True, we've had

as many failures as triumphs, but it's been a great learning experience for me and my five-year-old, Rose, who is spellbound by the whole recycling/planting/growing/getting dirty experience."

Bokashi compost bin and bran, Dhs360; www.bokashidubai.com





in an apartment' and bought a Bokashi bin. Around the same time I read about Hayley MacDonald in *Good Taste* (May issue) and how she used Bokashi to cultivate a fabulous vegetable garden. That really inspired me and in just a few months, my balcony garden has really taken off. I live on the 33rd floor and space is at a premium, but I have a system that works. The Bokashi waste is emptied into a large plastic tub punctured with drainage holes and layered with cheap potting compost. I leave it for a week or so to break down and then mix it with potting soil for planting. In the meantime, I use the top soil to grow salad greens, mustard, fenugreek, alfalfa etc – why waste all that space and lovely goodness? In pots, I'll try anything that's fast-growing and doesn't take up too much room. I have sprouting broccoli, purple basil, radishes, beetroot, Ceylon spinach, kangkong and spring onions, as well as tomatoes and edible flowers, although sometimes I get carried away and have to remind myself that it is just a balcony! Yes, I've had a few failures, but I've learned from them and I'm getting better all the time. I went through a stage where everything looked fabulous but I was getting no produce, but now it's bearing fruit. In fact, I'm having some friends around for dinner and I've promised that I will only serve what I've grown!"

LEAH'S BALCONY

"It all started with a couple of tomato plants that my parents gave me last Christmas. Until then, I had nothing but house plants in my Dubai apartment, and yet I'd been a gardener my whole life back home in Australia. I ate those tomatoes and thought, "Oh my goodness, I've forgotten how amazing real fruit tastes!", and I decided then to ramp it up a bit. Plus, it was really getting to me just how much food we were throwing away, so I Googled 'composting



This page: All sorts of tomatoes; Jo picks rocket leaves for lunch. Opposite page: Leah's balcony garden on the 33rd floor grows everything from spinach to strawberries and is a great green hangout for daughters Lucyana and Sophia

JO'S GARDEN

"I started Bokashi as a business around three-and-a-half years ago with my partner, Janine. It was a great opportunity because we weren't the only ones in Dubai who were concerned about the volume of food waste and the excessive use of chemicals, such as malathion and dursban, that leach into the soil and our water systems. We'd tried out the bins for the business and that was when I started using Bokashi personally. We'd had four-and-a-half years of gardening the conventional way, with all those



awful green balls and blue balls. Our garden was okay, but we had constant pests. For the last four years, we've used no chemicals at all and the plants are actually stronger.

I can't remember the last time we had aphids or mealy bugs, everything is so much healthier. My garden is a place to sit, to play, to grow and to potter, so I need peace of mind that it's

chemical-free. I feel good that I'm limiting my food waste and at the same time regenerating the soil – or sand! We'll try growing anything. Some things work, some don't, but the only limitations are in your head. I've had huge success with my tomatoes – I make and freeze my own tomato sauce just to use them up. My carrots are doing great and I'll pick some of that lovely rocket to make a salad for my lunch today – 100 per cent organic! With three children and two businesses, I don't have a lot of time, but composting is not difficult, particularly as I've set up an EzFlo system to water my garden using the liquid organic plant food. You just connect it to the water sprinkler system, fill the pot with Bokashi juice and the garden waters itself. It lasts four to six weeks, so it will keep watering and feeding your garden when you're away on holiday. In business terms, Bokashi has grown exponentially, especially in the last two years. It's amazing how the word is spreading, but I think there's a move to organic as people realise how harmful chemicals are, and what's better than growing your own?"

NEED HELP?

If you fancy growing your own but need a bit of guidance, the best person to turn to is Hayley MacDonald of besupernatural.com. A font of knowledge on sustainable living and organic gardening in the UAE, Hayley runs regular 'grow your own' workshops and private sessions, and her online store stocks all sorts of super foods and fabulous organic seeds. Check out www.facebook.com/besupernatural or call Hayley on 056 650 0684.