

The Alternative Kitchen Garden

Episode 60 transcript



Hello and welcome to episode 60 of the Alternative Kitchen Garden. I'm Emma, and it's a sunny morning in Oxfordshire, which doesn't really make up for the fact that it has been pouring with rain all week and that we had gales last night. Never mind, eh?

Today I'm going to be talking about CAT Cold Composting. Now we talked about composting in general terms last year, and I'll put a link to those episodes in the show notes, but CAT Cold Composting is a specific process that is ideal for small gardens.

CAT is short for the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales, and they develop practical solutions to environmental problems. It's also a place that you can visit, and it's definitely on my places-to-visit list and if you're in the vicinity it would be well worth dropping in. And the team at CAT have developed a process which is, as I said, ideal for composting in small gardens, in households, where real people compost, rather than those huge, huge hot compost heaps that you see on the telly that are staffed by hundreds of gardeners who turn them at will.

CAT Cold Composting has several names, it's also called the High Fibre Method, Cool Composting and also the 'feed and forget' method – so that tells you that it might be quite easy.

It can deal with kitchen waste, garden waste and paper and card waste, so if you don't have a good cardboard recycling scheme in your area it might be ideal for you. When you're practicing CAT Cold Composting, you don't need to turn the heap or add activator. You just add waste as and when it's available, so it's ideal for those black plastic, 'dalek' style composters where it's difficult to get in and turn them.

There are some important things to remember. You can't add diseased plant material or seeding weeds to it. It's not a hot composting system, it's not going to kill anything off. So if you put diseased material in, or you put seeds in, they may grow or carry on

The Alternative Kitchen Garden, <http://coopette.com/akg>



to infect your other plants when you use the compost. You can take the compost out, if you have on of those composters where you can get at the bottom, after a couple of months you can start taking the bottom layers out and use it as a continual process. I follow the CAT Cold Composting process, but I don't do it like that. I fill the bin up, let it rot down, and then dig the whole thing out in one go, because I find it more useful. But if you want to do it little and often, you can do it like that.

And basically it's easy peasy. You add compostable material to your compost bin or your compost heap as and when you have it. So when your little kitchen caddy is filled up with vegetable scraps, you empty those on. When you've got some cardboard that needs getting rid of, you scrunch that up and you put that on. You can do the same with newspaper. When you've got garden waste – grass clippings, or things like that – you just throw them on. The idea being that, in most households, this will come to an ideal balance of green and brown materials, that's carbon and nitrogen, and the whole thing will just take care of itself.

Crumpled cardboard, or cardboard tubes, are excellent things to add because not only do they add some carbon to the mix and dry it out (if you've got a lot of grass clippings they'll balance that out), but they also add reserves of air. Everything can get squashed down a bit flat in the compost heap, and lots of the composting organisms that do the work for you need oxygen. So if you can put in a few little reservoirs of air they'll thank you for that, and carry on composting.

The idea is that no particular layer, no layer of one particular substance, will be thicker than about 6 inches, that's 15 cm. As I said, if you just throw things on as and when you get them, it should all just balance out naturally. You don't need to wait until you've got enough of any sort of material to build layers into a proper heap.

You should avoid adding all the normal things that you would avoid adding to a compost heap. Pet poo from animals that aren't vegetarian – dogs, cats, anything like that – should not be added to the compost heap because it can contain pathogens that are dangerous to humans and you don't want to spread those around the garden. Pet poo from vegetarian animals (so chickens, rabbits, birds, anything like that) will be fine.

Don't add meat or dairy products. Not only will you attract every rat in the vicinity, but it will be a nasty, nasty heap. And the thing with cold composting is that it will be very slow to break down any woody material, so if you've got any woody stems, twigs and things like that, don't add them to a cold heap – use them somewhere else. So if you've got a shredder, or you can get them shredded, you can use them on paths. Or if you haven't then just pile them up in a quiet corner of the garden, let them rot down naturally, and lots of wildlife in your garden will thank you for leaving dead wood lying around and they'll make their home there.

So, just to recap the whole process. With CAT Cold Composting you add kitchen waste, garden waste and crumpled up cardboard and newspaper as and when you have it available. No specific layer should be more than about 15 cm (6 inches) thick, but

The Alternative Kitchen Garden, <http://coopette.com/akg>



you should find that if you just add waste as and when you have it, it will balance itself out.

You may need to add some water if your heap is a bit dry; conversely you may find that if you put a lot of grass clippings on it, or it doesn't have a lid, then it might get a bit wet and you need to add some more cardboard or paper.

You don't need to turn the heap, or add any sort of accelerator. But you should not add diseased plant material, seeding weeds, meat or dairy or horrible old pet poo from your cats and dogs.

In warm weather, if your heap is in the sunshine, after about 2 months the bottom layers will be finished compost and you can shovel those out if you want to. If not, just leave the whole thing to rot down and dig the whole lot out. If you do it that way, of course, you need more than one heap so you can be leaving one to rot down whilst you're filling another.

And that's about it really. CAT Cold Composting is as simple as it can get. It really takes advantage of the fact that nature wants things to compost down, so nature is doing all the hard work for you and it's ideal for small households and gardens. I've been doing my composting this way for a few years now and it's very low effort, very low maintenance. I absolutely love it. You get good compost out at the end. If you get any bits that haven't rotted down, of course you just add them back to the heap. You can sieve your finished compost if you want something that's nice and fine, or (like me) you can just leave the lumps in and use it as mulch – just throw it on the garden, it's very low maintenance indeed.

Anyway, I've been out in the Grow Dome this morning, So here I am, telling you what's going on outside.

It's Sunday morning and I am surveying the progress in the garden and the Grow Dome. I'm in the Grow Dome at the moment and it's gloriously sunny, so the vents are opening themselves. The 2 lower vents are open at the moment, but the top one is still held shut because we've had some very windy weather. In fact I'm getting very sick of the wind this year, because it just keeps blowing and blowing and blowing. It's very annoying.

So the good news in the Grow Dome is that I've got some little carrot seedlings coming up in my carrot tub. The sad news is that we had a sunny spell (I think it was Friday) inbetween some viciously windy and also very wet weather, and it looks like (despite the fact that they were in a propagator) my lettuce seedlings for the most part have dried out and shrivelled up. So I need to sow some more lettuce. Those lettuce seedlings were part of a Garden Organic experiment, as well, so that's a bit sad. If I grow some more lettuce it will be different. There's a couple of the Brown Goldring that are still alive, but most of the Rubens seems to have passed on, so that's a little bit sad.

The Alternative Kitchen Garden, <http://coopette.com/akg>



I have just finished, I think finished, planting out the calabrese seedlings. I have one or two left over but I think they're the weaker ones and should go on the compost. So I've got one...two...three...four...five...six...seven...eight calabrese seedlings growing in the Grow Dome now and I've just watered them in nicely. The soil in the Grow Dome raised beds is persistently dry, so I need to get my act together and do some more watering before it gets hotter and see if I can get some water reservoirs into the soil in here.

The peas are going great guns, and I think we'll have our first pea harvest from the Pilot peas very shortly now. I've got a couple of Douce Provence growing as well and there are a few carrot seedlings in with those.

Where the saffron is growing I have just pulled up the last of the leaf beet and given it to the chickens. And I have sown some spring onions seeds in their place, so they'll grow in amongst the saffron – which of course if corms growing deep in the soil, so it shouldn't have too much of an issue growing with the spring onions. Especially since, with the summer season coming on, the saffron is going to be dying back now. Being a Mediterranean plant, it doesn't like the summer and goes dormant in the hot days of summer and flowers in autumn if all goes well.

I've got some little marigold seedlings coming up there. My radishes, for the most part, I've thinned them down properly and I've got some good bulbs growing there. I think they're ready for eating, so I need to harvest the radishes at some point.

There's still no sign of the pond plants in the ponds, I'm getting slightly concerned about those and I might need to replace them, but I'm not entirely sure why. As I think I said last time, I've got some hornwort growing in there, and it sinks to the bottom of the pond in winter and then should come back in spring. At the moment the water is too cloudy for me to be able to see what's going on at the bottom... oh...no! The pond in the middle has a solar fountain in it, which at the moment isn't doing much but intermittently (when the sun is high enough) it does pump a little bit of water around and so in the pond in the centre the water is clearer and if I peer down into the bottom I can actually see the hornwort growing in the bottom. So it hasn't got the point where it's floating again yet, but it's not dead so that's a positive step! And as I mentioned before, there's lots of pond snails so that's good as well. So we're getting a bit of an environment going, certainly in the middle pond, if not the other two. Can't see in those, they're still too murky.

Outside in the garden there's another branch from next door's horse chestnut that has fallen off in the wind last night. It's not a very healthy tree that one, unfortunately. It lost a branch at the end of last year, and has just lost another one. It has got a lot of buds on it, though, so hopefully it might recover.

The goji berries are looking good, growing nicely at the moment. But the big news from the garden is that, a few days ago, I filled my new raised bed with homemade compost (it's a bit rough, but it will do) and I planted out my seed potatoes. So my first early seed potatoes are now in the bed. They've been well watered in, in the last few days – so the potatoes are planted and we have hopes of a potato harvest.

The Alternative Kitchen Garden, <http://coopette.com/akg>



And the larger of the sprouting broccoli plants is now showing definite signs of actually producing some broccoli, so that's good too. The little one is still little. So I don't know what's going to happen with that, it may be too small and I may have to just leave that for a little while longer. But the bigger one, definitely, has some purple sprouting broccoli coming along there, so that's cool. Right, I'm going to go indoors and record the rest of the show.

I wrote a post on my blog yesterday, about plant supports. At the moment, in the garden, pretty much all I use as plant supports is bamboo canes – which have their limitations, especially for things like peppers which need some lateral support when they've got heavily fruiting branches, as well as some vertical support. And although I make them into little wigwams for growing climbing plants, it's not ideal and I'm looking for some more suggestions about what to use as plant supports. What I'd really like are some of those big obelisks that you can buy in the garden centres, but they're not in the budget this year. So if you've got any hints and tips for plant supports that you would like to share, products that you use and love or the way that you do it in your garden (perhaps you make your own out of bits and pieces) – if you've got any stories about that, any hints and tips, some pictures maybe that you'd like to send in then the email address is akgpodcast@gmail.com and I'll be grateful for some suggestions. I'll see if I can make myself some funky plant supports this year. There'll be some climbing plants – peas, beans and achocha – that need support, and also (as I said) some peppers and tomatoes and things like that, that are bush plants but just need some more general support.

Nominations are now open for this year's Mouse and Trowel awards, so if you've got a favourite garden blog or podcast that you'd like to nominate for an award, then do hop along to the Mouse and Trowel Awards and make your nominations. I'll put a link to that in the show notes for you.

And next week I'm going to be talking about potatoes, so if you've got anything you'd like to share with the other listeners about growing potatoes then now is the time to do so. Again, the email address is akgpodcast@gmail.com, you can leave me a comment on the show home page (which is <http://coopette.com/akg>) or you can join in our Facebook group. In the meantime, have a great week in your garden. Goodbye!

The Alternative Kitchen Garden, <http://coopette.com/akg>

