

The Alternative Kitchen Garden

Episode 67 transcript



Hello and welcome to episode 67 of the Alternative Kitchen Garden. I'm Emma and it's raining today, and it was raining for the last couple of days so I don't really feel like going out into the garden today. There's lots of exciting things happening in the Grow Dome, so I'll be telling you about those very soon, but today I'm going to talk about something else that I've been promising to talk about, and that is the Master Composter scheme that I've been involved with recently.

The reason that I got involved initially was that I got a letter from Garden Organic saying that Oxfordshire County Council was setting up a new Master Composter scheme in the area – and as soon as I heard that I knew I had to get involved, partly because composting is one of my obsessions. I have 3 plastic compost bins out in the garden – 2 of those black plastic daleks, and an older style green one. I have 2 wormeries and I have a pair of Bokashi bins, although having used them as Bokashi composters for a couple of years I have given that up. And I also have a brown wheelie bin from the local council that collects cardboard and garden waste for composting off at the community composting site. So everything in our house that could be composted, pretty much, is.

And the reason that I got into composting initially is because it's very good for the environment. When you compost your waste at home you decrease the amount of waste going to landfill and all of the associated transport costs with that. And also I'd been thinking for a while that I wanted to get involved in something in my local community, do some volunteer work, give something back to the local community and get more involved. I have lived here for a number of years now and I haven't really been involved with the local community. I've been doing everything in isolation and looking forward to the future, if we want resilient communities that can cope with climate change and things like that then we really do need to be working together to make some of the changes that are necessary.

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So those are the reasons that I wanted to get involved. And the course itself, the Master Composter course in Oxfordshire, is run by 3 partners – Oxfordshire Country Council, WRAP (which is the Waste and Resources Action Programme, a government funded body helping to reduce waste and getting us to treat waste as a resource rather than rubbish, and they do a lot of work with industry as well as with households) and the third partner is Garden Organic, which I've mentioned before, the UK's organic gardening charity and they do a lot of research into organic gardening and they're very keen on composting (compost being the cornerstone of any organic garden).

Those were the 3 parties that were helping us to become Master Composters and who had set up the course. It was a 2 day course, a Friday and a Saturday. On the Friday we were in Oxford itself and it was mainly classroom based in the morning – we were being introduced to the partners in the scheme and looking at why home composting is such a good thing and why the government wants to encourage home composting and how the Master Composters fit into that scheme. And where they fit into that ideal is that there has been some research done about past schemes to encourage composting, where they give away composters or you have low-priced composters (subsidized composters) being given out to homes to encourage them to compost. And the results of the research seem to suggest that although these schemes have a huge impact on the number of people who start composting, as soon as you encourage more and more people to start composting at home you also run into people who start composting, have problems and then give it up. And once they give it up they've become lapsed composters, and apparently they are very, very reluctant to start composting again. And the reason that they lapse is that they run into problems, so they have too many grass cuttings in their bin and it goes all slimy, or they have too many brown things and it doesn't rot down at all. For whatever reason, they encounter a problem, they stop composting and it's very hard to get them to start again.

The Master Composters are volunteers who go out into the community to help people with their compost bins, to stop them becoming lapsed composters. We're part of the process for encouraging people to compost in the first place, but then we're also a support network to help keep them composting so that they keep those benefits for themselves and the environment and don't give up.

In the afternoon we went to visit an Agrivert site in Oxfordshire. Agrivert do the council's composting, so when my brown wheelie bin gets collected (with its cardboard and garden waste) it goes off to Agrivert and they compost on a big site, with big compost heaps. They shred everything first and then it goes onto a heap and gets turned, and stuff like that. It gets up to about 70 C, so it's pretty warm – you could see it steaming. The day that we went was in April, and it wasn't terribly warm, and you could see the heap steaming. Apparently it was a typical winter heap, so it had lots of twiggy things in, and stuff like that. In summer you get more grass cuttings, and so it would look a bit greener, but it was fairly standard.

The Agrivert site was specially built, because of the Environment Agency regulations, it's all done on a concrete base – a specially built concrete base that deals with all the

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run-off. When you compost, a lot of water comes out, whatever you compost, and the run-off has some stuff in it that really shouldn't leach out into the environment. Because if it runs into the rivers then you get too many nutrients in rivers, and it's not good for the environment, so they collect what's called leachate in a big tank and in the summer (when the weather is dry) they spray that back onto the compost as it's being made to cut down on its water requirements – if it dries out it doesn't compost very well. They use all that on site and there's no pollution to the environment. The site itself is rented from a farmer and he gets paid some of his rent in compost and the rest can be taken away by landscapers and people like that. It's a hugely interesting process, although when you look at it there's not much to look at, so that was quite fun although we weren't there for very long.

The second day we spent at Ryton Organic Gardens, with Garden Organic, and if you haven't listened to episode 24 about my trip last year to Ryton Organic Gardens then I thoroughly recommend that one if you want to know what goes on there. We had some more classroom sessions, and these were about composting basics. You don't need to be a compost expert, you just need to have an interest in compost and they will tell you everything that you need to know. It's not about the general public all of the information that has ever been written on composting, it's about how to get people started. It's about cold composting, easy composting that everybody can do without too much trouble, and easy guidelines about what should go on the compost heap and what shouldn't. So they give you all of those composting basics on the day and they also encourage you to think about how you might want to spend your volunteering time. With the Oxfordshire scheme, once you sign up and you're trained then you're expected to give 30 hours of community service in the first year. That can range from anything from going out and about and doing shows with stands, and encouraging people to pick up a compost bin on their way home. You can write articles, you can go and visit friends and family and help them with their composting - anything that you feel like doing, you can do within the remit of your 30 hours as long as it's local. All of these Master Composter schemes are local – it's a Think Global, Act Local activity. You're encouraged to think about what you might do, although obviously you don't need to put your plans in writing or anything like that.

And then you're taken outside to Garden Organic's compost demonstration garden, so that if you haven't seen some of these compost heaps and compost bins that are in use and are being given away on the subsidized schemes then you can get to play with those – with the compost tumblers, and the wormeries and all the different sorts of plastic compost bins that you can get. There's also a little bit of free time to wander round the shop at Garden Organic and a wander round Ryton Gardens if you haven't been there before.

That was a very interesting two days, and I met lots of interesting people who shared some of my interests in composting, in gardening, in the environment and there were lots of people there who keep chickens – so lots of interesting people, from all walks of life.

Garden Organic have a website called <http://www.homecomposting.org.uk/>, and on there is the UK Master Composter directory, so if you want to sign up for a Master

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Composter scheme, if you want to find out if there's one in your local area, then you can look at <http://www.homecomposting.org.uk/>. They're not all called Master Composter schemes. Most of them are run by local councils, but some of them are run by local wildlife groups. If you have a look on that website then you'll find out if there's one in your local area that Garden Organic know about. If there isn't, and you would like there to be one in your local area, then probably your first port of call should be your local council, but there is some information on the website about how to start a scheme. And if you want a Master Composter to come to your event that you're setting up, or if you want some advice, then there are the contact details for all of the schemes. You can get in touch and you can tell them what you need and a Master Composter will be sent out to give you a hand or to encourage people in your area to compost. I will put the link to that website in the show notes.

Another website that is brilliant for composting is WRAP's website for households – <http://www.recyclenow.com>. And <http://www.recyclenow.com/compost> is their composting section. There's lots of information there if you're new to composting about what can go in a bin and what can't, and some games you can play, and you can also find out if there are subsidized compost bins available in your area (of course this is UK only, I'm afraid). And they have news stories about composting when hugely exciting things are happening in the world of composting, so that's <http://www.recyclenow.com>.

I've already spoken a little bit about the benefits of home composting, and I'm certain I'm preaching to the converted here already, but just to recap some of the reasons why home composting is a thing that we should all be getting involved with:

- First of all for the Master Composters is the waste reduction. You reduce the amount of waste that's going off to landfill – and landfill sites here in the UK are filling up and sending things to landfill is getting more and more expensive, so we have to pay for that in our taxes. And because you reduce the amount of organic waste that's sitting in landfill and decomposing without any air, you reduce the amount of methane that's produced. Methane is itself a very potent greenhouse gas that's contributing to climate change, so we really don't want to be producing methane and letting it go up into the atmosphere. Some of the newer landfill sites can collect the methane and use it for fuel, but that's not really ideal – you want to stop it being created in the first place. And when you collect rubbish and take it to the landfill site there's a lot of transport involved so there's a carbon cost for that as well with people driving around in big lorries full of trash. So waste reduction is a very good thing for the environment.
- For gardeners, composting means that you can add organic matter into your soil, which has all kinds of benefits including water retention and drainage. It seems unlikely that organic matter in the soil can contribute both to saving water, holding water in the soil, and helping it drain away properly – but it's true, it's the miracle of organic matter. You'll be reducing the need for water, and if we get dry summers and hosepipe bans that means that you'll be spending less time watering because any water there is will be held in the soil for the plants to get at.

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- Adding organic matter into the soil also helps to keep the soil healthy. You're encouraging the soil ecosystem that should be there and that keeps your plants nice and healthy and strong and reduces pest and disease problems.
- It also reduces the need for fertilizer. You'll be adding nutrients back into the soil with your compost, so you won't need to go out and buy fertilizer. You can avoid peat-based products and use your own compost and you don't have to buy fertilizer. And all of those things that you buy in have a carbon footprint, even if they're organic, environmentally-friendly products. When you go out and buy it, it has come from somewhere and it has been transported from somewhere. There are production costs and transport costs, so every time you buy something for your garden you are adding to your carbon footprint. So when you compost you can decrease that and you can also save yourself money. You can turn your rubbish into something decent for the garden and it doesn't cost you a penny – so that's excellent in these times of credit crunch.
- And compost is absolutely fabulous for wildlife. When we clear up our gardens and we tidy everything away and take everything that is decomposing out of the garden, we starve all of the decomposers in the garden. We're talking about creatures that live in the soil, fungi and insects and all kinds of things that eat decaying organic matter. And they're the bottom of the food chain, so if you take those away then you get rid of all the bigger wildlife as well. There'll be nothing for the birds to eat, they'll be nothing for the hedgehogs to eat. If you can have a pile of decomposing matter in your garden - it doesn't matter if you put it in a compost heap, that's fine, it's nice and tidy but it's also still there for all the things that want to eat it – and you put that compost back on the garden then you'll be encouraging the whole of the garden ecosystem. You'll be building your wildlife from the bottom up, and because there's all of those little bits of wildlife that you can't really see, you'll have the big wildlife that you can see as well. So not only is it good for the environment as a whole but it's good for your garden – your local environment – as well.

Those are the reasons that I got involved in the Master Composter scheme, it's what's involved with the Master Composter scheme and how to get involved if you want to do that. I will put all of these addresses in the show notes for you.

If you want to know more about composting then you can listen to some of our previous episodes. Episode 3, early on in the Alternative Kitchen Garden because it's so important, episode 3 is about composting in general. Episode 26 is about worm composting, episode 32 was about making leaf mould (which is something we'll be thinking about later in the year when the leaves start to drop) and a more recent one – episode 60 was about cold composting, and the easy way to go about composting, the low effort, low maintenance way that I usually use.

If you don't have a compost heap you should go out and start one right now for all of those reasons I've already outlined. Those of you who are already composting, well done, keep it up. Let me know your composting hints and tips – you can send me an email to akgpodcast@gmail.com. If you're a Master Composter, or you're a compost volunteer, somewhere else in the world then do let me know how your scheme works

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and how people can get involved if they're near you. You can leave a comment on the show home page (which is <http://coopette.com/akg>) or you can join in the discussions in the Facebook group. And as I mentioned last week, the Alternative Kitchen Garden is now on Twitter (<http://twitter.com/akgpodcast>) for real-time updates from the garden as and when I get out there and it stops raining. Do get in touch; in the meantime have a great week in your garden. Goodbye.

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