

# Waste not, want not

Don't chuck prunings and bindweed roots: treat them right and they'll give your plot a boost, says Lia Leendertz. Photographs by Joel Redman

All summer long, I throw green, sappy cuttings and vegetable peelings into the compost bin at the end of the garden. Every autumn - ideally on one of those cool, crisp days that are just made for digging - I turn it out and find strata of deep brown, crumbly compost under the top layer of unrotted leek tops and onion skins, to spread on my borders. It's a beautiful, simple system: waste turns into nutrients to feed the garden, and bulk to improve the soil, which produces more growth, which eventually goes back into the compost bin. The circle is closed.

But not all waste is so simple. Does everyone have a chipper to chop up woody prunings and turn them into mulch? I'm fairly sure not. And what on Earth do you all do with the roots of couch grass and bindweed? I suspect the answer is pretty straightforward. We send them off in the green council bin, or we save them up in an ugly pile and drive them to the tip. Or, if our allotment committees or washing-line schedules let us get away with it, we make a bonfire and burn them.

But I don't want to cart mine away. I like the closed circle, and it's not just a hippy affectation. Growth removes nutrients from the soil, and if we later burn or cart this off, we have to replace those nutrients by

shipping in fertilisers and organic matter from elsewhere. It's a less green way of gardening, sure, but it's also more complicated and time-consuming: a lose-lose situation. Here are a couple of neat ways I've found to turn problem waste into an asset.

## POND WEED BINS

Perennial weeds are a big problem for me. While we have finally (after seven years on the allotment) beaten the couch grass back to a point where we can fool ourselves we have the upper hand, those roots do keep on coming. Couch grass, bindweed and dandelions all have thick, white, persistent roots. Put even the tiniest part of a root into the compost and it will spring into life and send its roots out through everything else in there. The best solution I have found is to drown them. Those roots are stores of energy, so they take a long time to die, but dunked for several months in dustbins full of water, and they eventually rot down into a compostable mush.

But what of all the nutrients those weeds took from the soil? The water turns rich and nutritious, and starts to stink. It can be used in its raw form as a "weed tea" - a fertiliser to be diluted and watered on to plants - but I'm trying something else too: floating duckweed on the top.

Scooped from the pond and added to my weed bins (pictured left), the duckweed is right at home. It loves the nutrient-rich water and gorges itself on it (which also helps to keep the stench down), rapidly spreading to cover the water. It is also a great addition to the compost heap - just skim it off the surface and dump it on the pile, leaving a few pieces behind to re-grow. Or just put it straight on to the soil as a mulch.



Once out of the water, the duckweed quickly dies, but it keeps weeds down and adds bulky organic matter - magic for soil structure - and, of course, those nutrients.

## DEAD HEDGE

What to do with woody prunings from trees, shrubs and perennials, other than burning them? I've made mine into a dead hedge. In fact, I've

made several: I'm slightly addicted and have two at the allotment and one at home (pictured above). It's a very simple idea. You push two parallel lines of stakes into the ground, between 30-60cm apart, and chuck your prunings into the space between them. While this doesn't return nutrients to the garden with any great speed, it does serve several functions. It deals with this type of waste, above all, and

also creates an attractive screen. I love the look as the various layers of twigs build up, reminiscent of a rammed earth wall. All those nooks, crannies and stems create a wonderful, stable home for wildlife. Plus it does slowly rot down: although I regularly pile clippings on to my dead hedges, none ever entirely runs out of space for more.

Both solutions keep the waste within the garden, rather than

sending it off to the tip, which cuts down work. And each augments the garden in some way, turning my problem waste into something beautiful and/or useful.

## MORE NIFTY WAYS WITH GARDEN WASTE

**Composting** Add all your vegetable peelings and green waste to a bog-standard compost bin. Cooked food, meat, dairy and eggs need to be kept out, though, or you'll attract rats. A good balance of green, sappy waste and something to soak it up, such as cardboard, makes for happy, easy compost.

**Hot composting** The bin is designed to heat up to temperatures that make it safe to add cooked food. Some, used well, can get warm enough that they will kill perennial weed roots, but few make any promises on this. Try the Green Johanna or the Hotbin, both from [originalorganics.co.uk](http://originalorganics.co.uk).

**Bokashi** This brilliant Japanese system (from [wigglywiggles.co.uk](http://wigglywiggles.co.uk)) has a "pickling" effect on waste. You store kitchen waste - cooked, meat and all - covered with bokashi grains in a sealed bin for two weeks, then add it to your normal compost bin or straight to the surface of soil. The pickling process makes the waste break down into compost extremely quickly, and renders it unattractive to rats.

**Wormeries** Another way to compost uncooked and cooked kitchen scraps, these make a fine, rich compost that's good for containers. Try the Worm Cafe ([wigglywiggles.co.uk](http://wigglywiggles.co.uk)) or the Tiger Wormery ([originalorganics.co.uk](http://originalorganics.co.uk)). Omlet, the makers of the Eglu chicken coop, have just launched the Hungry Bin ([omlet.co.uk](http://omlet.co.uk)), but at £175 for just the bin with no worms, it's at the luxury end of the wormery market.

**Dead hedges make an attractive screen - and a stable home for wildlife**

