



Home Organics Management Backyard Food Waste Digester

Food waste digesters are an easy way for smaller households (2-4 people) to compost food waste in their backyards. Digesters can compost small amounts of kitchen scraps, including meat, grains, dairy, and cooked foods. The enclosed, half-buried digester is harder for wildlife and pests to access, helping to keep critters out of your compost and away from your home. Digesters can also be used to compost small amounts of pet waste if placed at least 10 feet away from a food garden or fruit-producing tree. Digesters work very well in small backyards when the goal of composting is waste diversion as opposed to compost production, since they do not produce a finished material.

This system does not rely on a balance of materials and aeration to work properly. Instead, the digester uses heat from the sun and microbial activity to develop a rapid decomposition process, producing a nutrient-rich leachate that is absorbed into the soil.



An important distinction between digesters and other forms of composters is that they do not make finished compost and therefore do not need to be harvested. The leachate from your digester will still provide a valuable source of nutrients for plants surrounding it. Digesters are often referred to as “green cones” due to their shape and the most common colour in which they are sold.

Getting Started:

- Choose a sunny location with good drainage and easy to dig soil, ideally near or within a garden containing perennial plants.
 - A minimum of 4 hours direct sunlight is required
 - Locate your digester away from out-buildings, wood piles, or thick shrubs/trees to dissuade critters
- Dig a circular, 2-foot-deep hole the diameter of your purchased digester product.
- You can encircle your digester with flowers or edible plants to take advantage of the nutrient-rich leachate created.

Using the Digester

- Add kitchen waste to your digester(s). While your digester can compost small amounts of meat scraps, a diversity of food scraps should also be added. Digesters work best on a well-balanced diet.
- Digesters cannot take any carbon-based materials (i.e. paper towel, newspaper, any yard or garden waste).
- If composting pet waste, be sure to locate the digester at least 10 feet (3 metres) from your veggie garden and fruit bearing trees and shrubs as a precaution.

Effort Scale



Easy

Hard

After installation, adding food scraps is easy and requires little maintenance.

Cost Scale



Less \$

More \$\$

Commercially available products range from \$80 to \$250.

Other Things to Consider:

- Adding some food scraps in addition to pet waste will help the process. If you are composting cat waste, please note that cat litter cannot be added to the green cone.
- Do not add compostable/ biodegradable bags.
- Your kitchen waste should provide more than enough moisture for the bin, but if the material does appear dry, add a small amount of water.
- For a household of 2-4 people, one digester should be sufficient. In optimal conditions, each digester can manage approximately 6kg (13lbs) of food scraps a week. However, if you're using digesters as your only composter and produce a large amount of kitchen waste, you may need two or more digesters, or another system to ensure that all kitchen waste is properly managed.

Longer Term Digester Management

- Food waste digesters are not designed to produce finished compost and are best left in position for **up to five years**
- After this time, you may need to relocate it to another region of your yard or garden. However, if the digester is still working efficiently and not full, you may not need to relocate it. If you do choose to harvest the contents of your digester, the partially decomposed matter removed should be dug (trenched) directly into a garden bed and allowed to finish composting. It is not advisable to harvest a digester that has been used for pet waste composting.
- The addition of a cereal-based accelerator powder containing natural bacteria is recommended to encourage microbial activity in the green cone, especially in the initial stages of use and through the winter if necessary. You may receive a package of accelerator powder with the purchase of a green cone digester and can try to purchase more packages online or at a local home improvement or garden center. It is recommended to use the green cone a few times before adding the accelerator to build up enough food scraps for the bacteria to go to work on
- If the level of food scraps in your digester appears to not be decreasing but only getting higher, you can often help lower its level by:
 - pouring in hot (not boiling) water
 - get an additional digester or other composting system to increase processing capacity

Raised Bed Installation

If the soil in your yard has insufficient drainage for green cone installation or if your soil is too rocky to allow you to dig the required two-foot hole for the green cone basket, installing it in a raised bed (as seen in the photos below) can be a good alternative.



Digesters and Wildlife

Digesters have a high likelihood of attracting wildlife, especially if foods such as meats, cooked food, and fruit and vegetable scraps are added. Only use a digester if you can secure it from wildlife (e.g. electric fencing), and consider increasing the pest resistance by following the below instructions.

Increasing the Pest Resistance of Your Green Cone

If you are at all concerned about wildlife or rodents, you should wrap the bottom basket of your food digester in hardware cloth before installing it.

Materials needed:

- a 2 ft. x 6 ft. piece of 1/4 inch, 23-to-18-gauge hardware cloth
 - a small roll of thin wire or zap straps
 - a pair of wire cutters
1. Start on the top edge, and wrap the bottom basket with the hardware cloth, leaving about 12" hanging on the end to be folded up around the bottom.
 2. Use the zap straps or thin wire to secure hardware cloth to the basket where it meets, on the bottom and around the rim (just below it).
 3. Cut the wire that comes above the rim in four or five radial slices so that it can be folded down flat to ground level to make an apron.
 4. Secure the black and green cones to the baskets, put it in the hole you dug, fill in hole, and cover the wire apron with dirt. Finish the rest of the installation as per manufacturer's instructions.



*This guide is derived from a series of Factsheets from the Compost Education Center.
For more information and resources from the CEC, visit compost.bc.ca*



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