

## Council recognition for the Oxfordshire Master Composters



Oxfordshire County Council's Chairman, Zoe Patrick, was clearly delighted to award recognition certificates to MCs Angela Hoy (centre) and Lynda Smith (right), who represented the scheme's 23 volunteers at County Hall on 7<sup>th</sup> June.

Angela and Lynda both kindly stepped forward to speak about their experiences as Master Composters, fielding familiar questions on bindweed and vermin!

This is the third time the ceremony has been held, and the MCs have been honoured every time. Coinciding with National Volunteer Week, the council also recognised the work of the Countryside Access Team, the Visiting and Advocacy Team, and the Library Service.

At the county council, we have over 2,000 volunteers supporting our services. These volunteers dedicate their time by doing activities such as: acting as school governors, driving community transport minibuses, supporting vulnerable young people as advocates, providing emergency support in floods and harsh winters as well as many more areas.

# Zen and the art of caravan composting

by MC Jan Holah

Greetings from Inverewe Gardens. I can't believe we made it!

Last autumn we were in the Botanic Gardens at Ventnor (most southerly botanic gardens?) and then spring in one of the most northerly gardens. It is quite remarkable and in an extraordinary location.

We were touring the north of Scotland with our caravan, driving some of the N500.



Jan's husband, Jim, at Inverewe.

I always collect composting material whilst away and take it home but three weeks is too long for that. I have been very disappointed in the recycling available on most sites, usually dependent on size of site and what recycling is done locally.

We arrived at the Dunnet Bay site in Caithness, with a full pot of compost ready to be disposed of. No food recycling!



The compost bins at Inverewe are disguised as beehives. One opens at the front with a glass viewing panel.

However, not daunted, I went to reception to ask if they had food recycling separate from the site. No, they said, there's none locally.

I explained about being an MC and resenting putting food in the general waste and a penny rolled to the bottom and the guy said "Oh, that's what the compost bins are for! Everyone's got them round here. We've got some out the back. We could use them for our waste....."

So, bullseye! I disposed of my waste and got somebody else to start composting. Hurrah - but not much use to OCC.

## Meetings with remarkable animals

by MC Tony Hirtenstein

Have I ever told you about the day I was head-butted by a sheep?

It happened at Littleworth on a hot day in May. I was exploring a public footpath that led to a gap in a hedge. A number of sheep were resting in the shade under the trees. As I returned through the gap an elderly sheep head-butted me very gently, twice! I just managed to escape.

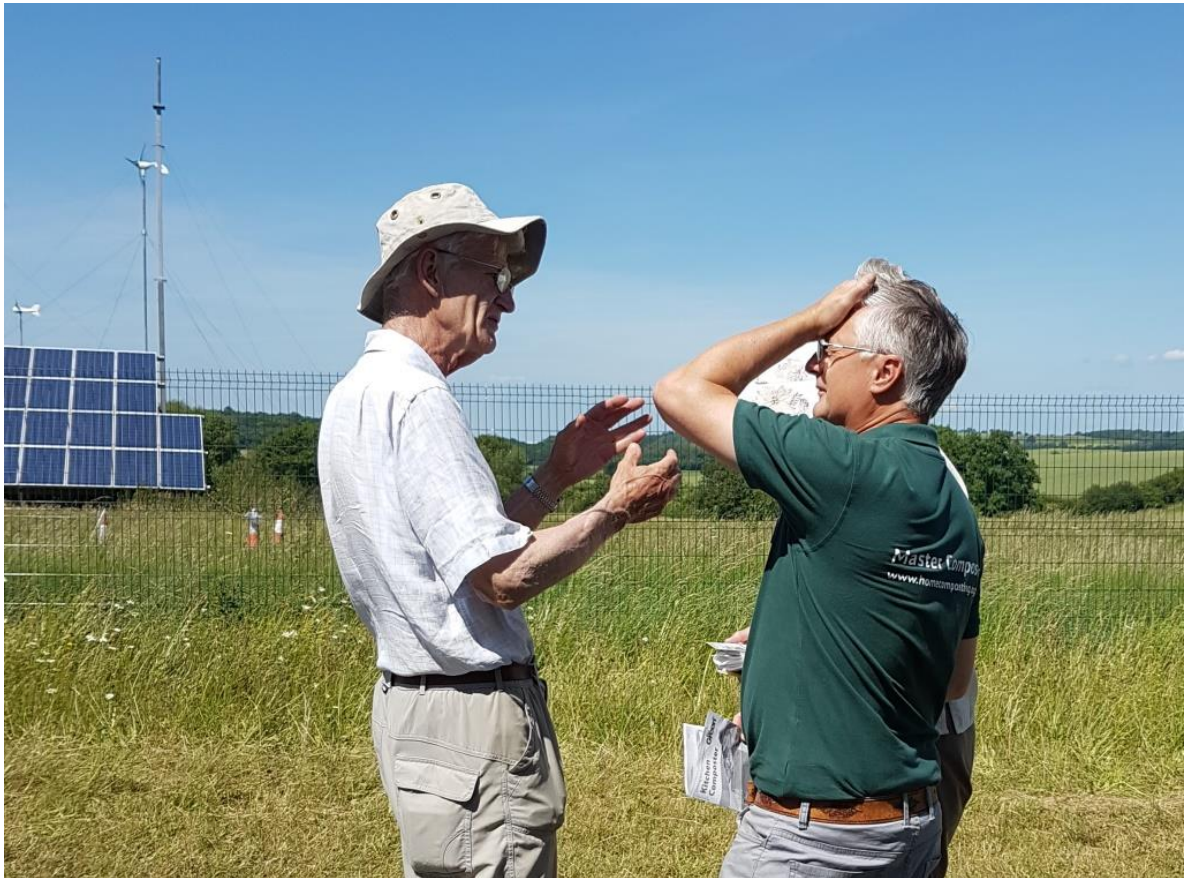
The very same day, I came home and checked a rat cage baited with a piece of a Mars bar. A large sleepy occupant, very spiky, was resting there. It took a bit of persuasion to get him out of the cage; we stared into each other's eyes for a while; and then he snuffled off quietly and disappeared.

Alas, I did not take a picture, being preoccupied with holding the cage to let him out. It was a miraculous meeting, and he may have been in the garden because of the hedgehog nest placed there. I must go and see if the food put out for him has been eaten...

## **WeSET: the green agenda**

by MC Geoff Branner

Oxfordshire Love Food Hate Waste and Master Composters were represented at the WeSET Open Day on 17th June at the Westmill Wind and Solar Farm Co-Operative near Shrivenham.



Geoff shielding his eyes from the sun, during a discussion on making better compost.

On a blazing hot day, people could view inside a turbine and explore the solar farm as well as make kites and forge their own keyring at the blacksmith's.

The day didn't get as many visitors as the organisers had hoped for and most of those attending were already committed to the green agenda. Nevertheless, both Gail (LFHW Champion) and I had a useful number of conversations about avoiding food waste and making better compost. The added bonus was the entertainment throughout the afternoon by Oxford band The Brickwork Lizards.

## **Bananas – to compost or not to compost?**

by MC Lynda Smith

All sorts of kitchen waste can be put into the compost bin, though there are other uses for some items.

We all have heard that over-ripe bananas, instead of being thrown away, can be made into banana cake, bread or smoothies, but how about using in curry? Google 'banana skin curry' and you will find a recipe using the cut up skins in a vegetable or meat curry. The skin disappears and leaves a lovely banana flavour in the curry.

I remember a winemaking class in the 70's advising using the water from boiled bananas in the water added to tinned wine concentrate - banana added extra 'body'!

And of course here at Agnes Court it's not unusual during the tomato growing season to spot banana skins decorating the tomato plants - the potassium in the banana skin is good for ripening the tomatoes and helping the plant grow. An experienced gardener told me he puts a whole banana skin in the bottom of the pot before planting the tomato.

Roses also benefit from the potassium in banana skins. Just place the banana skin on the soil under the rose, by the roots. It quickly turns black so it won't be noticed for long.

Don't waste those bananas! Try some of these tips and let us know how your tomatoes and roses grow this season.

## Hedgehog visitors

by MC Sophie Blenkinsop

We began seeing regular hedgehogs in the autumn of 2015, which was an exciting development for our wildlife garden.

Our garden is not large but it does back onto a school playing field which has a mature hedge boundary. We have a conifer hedge dividing us from neighbours on one side and a gap under the fence on the other, providing a hedgehog corridor and roaming territory.

As we were keen for them to return and feed up ahead of winter hibernation, we started putting food out each evening. We found their favourite was mealworms and Spike's hedgehog food which we put out in shallow bowls, alongside a dish of fresh water. It is very important for hedgehogs to keep hydrated in order to remain healthy, particularly during warm weather.



I turned an old plastic dog bed into a protected waterproof feeding station, which provides them with a safe place to eat. We can see this from our back window and on some evenings we have been lucky enough to see four hedgehogs together at the feeding bowls. Our dog is very interested in our prickly visitors so we always put him on a lead in the garden after dark.

Hints at Christmas resulted in a couple of hedgehog houses being gratefully received. These are sited in wild patches in the garden, where we have left log piles and plenty of leaf litter, so I hope they are used for nesting or hibernation.

We feel very privileged to have these lovely creatures visiting our garden. One is quite relaxed in our company and often comes out for a drink and a snack on these late

summer evenings when we are in the garden. It has been a willing model for a few of the accompanying photos!

If you are interested in hedgehogs the following websites may be helpful:

[www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk](http://www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk)

[www.hedgehogstreet.org.uk](http://www.hedgehogstreet.org.uk)

[www.hughwarwick.com](http://www.hughwarwick.com)

## **Farewell to Oxfordshire**

by MC Angela Hoy

As many of you will know, I'm leaving for Canada at the end of August, so I thought I would just put down a few memories of the past five years' Master Composting activities.

I remember the first time I heard about this admirable scheme, at a CAG Social in the Town Hall in Oxford, where there was a large display with a knowledgeable and friendly person in attendance, who answered my queries about the scheme and how to go about gaining this addition to my CV! He told me whom to contact and in due course I was advised that there was another training course being set up at Garden Organic in Warwickshire, on which I enrolled.

It was a fascinating day, and a wonderful site to investigate, with its innovative ways of growing fruit and vegetables and the varied ways of dealing with compost. Us new recruits all gathered together for a group photograph and went off into the wider world armed with our new green tee shirts and fleeces, and our name badges.

Several years of volunteering at various local events have followed, as well as regular training days (who can forget the wormery day, and watching handfuls of wiggly wigglers being put into our individual boxes to take away?)

I hope to continue flying the flag for home composting, and am reliably informed that the Mayor of Vancouver is a keen recycler, so who knows, I could start a similar scheme there!

## **Creating my first organic garden**

by David Garrett of Garden Organic

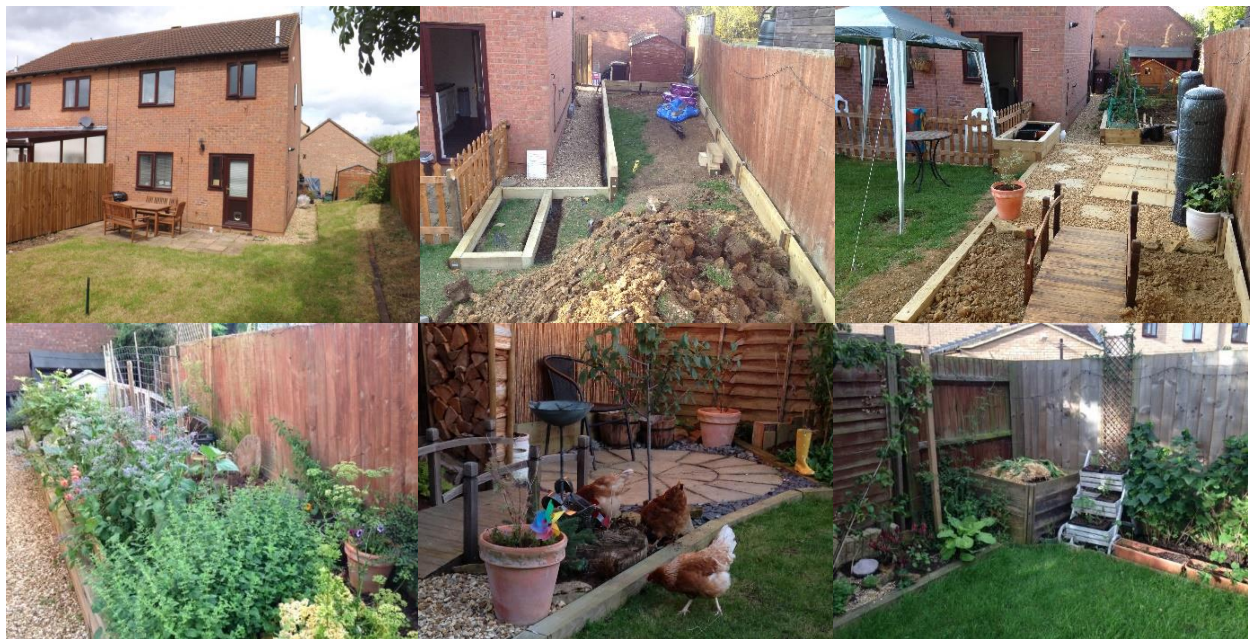


Just over two years ago now we bought our first house; and of course the first priority (for me anyway) was the garden! We were in quite a nice position in that the garden was pretty much a blank canvas, majority grass, with a relatively steep bank down one side of the house which flattened out at the back.

First job was some fairly heavy landscaping – the existing sloped ground made a large amount of space impossible to use – we also quickly discovered the ground was clay and not much else, pooling rain for days after any shower.

After many months of digging, we cut away the banking at the top and filled in using supports at the bottom to create a level terraced area. We used wooden sleepers to create the terracing, strengthened by steel rods running through them. This area later became veg beds (after adding a lot of green waste), a chicken coop and run (now home to our chickens and quails), and a small ‘jungle’ for my son.

The pond, again boxed with sleepers, is raised (to prevent paddling!) and built using an old water storage tank found in the loft; the smaller cistern acts as a bog garden next to it. And don't worry – I haven't forgotten the compost bin! We have a square wooden slatted bin to the right of the garden and also a wormery which my two year old son loves!



## Rot or Not?

by MC Emma Cooper

Last month I started a new series on the blog. Rather controversially, amongst a group of people committed to composting, it is about making sure as little as possible makes it to the compost heap! It's about looking at food in a different light, and making as much use of it as possible, before deciding that the only suitable use for the remnants is to recycle them into garden food.

I've started an A-Z series with Avocados (<http://oxonmcs.blogspot.co.uk/2017/06/a-is-for-avocado.html>), since not only are they often in the news these days, but they're one of those foods that has a tendency to go from 'just ripe' to 'completely past it' in the blink of an eye. The article includes links to information on how to store avocados (apparently a controversial topic!), use up overripe ones and even ideas on making use of the stones and the skin.

I'm sure there's plenty of wisdom among us, so if you have a suggestion I have not included then don't be shy! Leave it as a comment on the blog. You can also email me ideas for this month's topic, ahead of schedule – I'm going to tackle Beans – or bide your time and leave a comment once the post is published. If you've got a suggestion for future letters of the alphabet then let me know.