

## Changing My Wasteful Habits

I am participating in a course offered by GAIA Education on ecological design. Last week I was asked:

***What is your current waste system for: unused food, human waste (humanure), pet waste, garden waste, disposal of things you no longer use or need, etc.? Is any of these systems in place benefiting other organisms or ecosystems or is it contaminating and polluting? Is the system energy efficient?***

We had a 'party' for a group of enduring friends recently and I was very conscious of the amount of food and drink that we produced and consumed and concerned by what was thrown in the bins at the end. The GAIA prompts and my need to do something different, if I was to live up to the ideals of the course, tipped me into thinking about our family waste disposal and recycling system. I started by making a map of our current system for using and disposing or recycling household, garden and water resources (Figure 1). The exercise raises the question of what do I/we really need? and challenges us to change our habits. It's clear we can reduce consumption and waste in all three areas - household, garden and water and so over the next couple of weeks I tried to do exactly that.

**Figure 1** Map of the waste we produce as a family and what happens to it



Like most people we separate the household waste into what we think can be recycled from waste that will go to landfill. Our local authority is fairly good when it comes to the items we can recycle and our landfill and recycled waste bins are collected on alternative weeks. Large items that we need to dispose or recycle are taken to the local Recycling Centre (I took an old armchair to the recycle centre this week). Occasionally we make use of the local 'Bring Centres' in car parks for things like clothes and shoes, but more often we take such items to the charity shops (we have 5 in our nearest town).



But for a small family I am ashamed to say that we produce a lot of waste and there is certainly plenty of room for improvement. Perhaps guilt and shame are necessary accompaniments to awareness to motivate us to act.

### **Changing Habits - Reducing Consumption & Waste**

There are currently three adults living in our home but we still manage to generate quite a lot of waste. So my/our first priority is to try to reduce the amount of waste we produce. The obvious first step is to be more conscious and responsible about what we buy – particularly when it comes to food as the bulk of our ongoing waste is from food packaging, food we do not consume and stuff that is not used when food is prepared.

We also have wasted – soiled bedding from a small number of animals we keep. We have a couple of chickens (sadly there were four but two were killed by a fox last week) and some ducks. But they also consume some of our food waste for example the outer leaves or stalks of vegetables like cauliflower, broccoli and lettuce.

We also produce large amounts of garden ‘waste’ – mainly grass cuttings, leaves and uprooted plants we don’t want (weeds) and tree branches. These are piled high in an area of the garden but over the years the pile has grown and is quite a mess. The vegetable matter eventually breaks down but it is not managed so that it breaks down quickly and efficiently.

### **Wasting less food**

Looking at our household waste map the biggest immediate change we can make is to reduce the amount of food waste and separate the waste we produce and compost that which is surplus to our needs. Reducing the amount of food waste involves firstly changing our shopping habits. Being much clearer and more careful about what we are buying and only buying enough to meet our needs – what we can eat within the time the food is eatable – I am happy to eat most foods beyond their expiry dates. My wife and I have to coordinate our buying of food much better than we currently do. If we can achieve this then it should reduce our weekly shopping bills. In fact, this week I deliberately selected the smaller shopping trolley to limit what I bought – it worked.

Reducing the amount of food waste also involves changing our cooking habits. We often cook more than we can consume – while we will often eat the leftovers as another meal, this is not always the case and far too often we leave cooked food until it is no longer fit to eat.

Recycling the food that we do not consume is perhaps the easiest way of reducing food waste. Some of it – like uncooked vegetable scraps we feed to the chickens and ducks but we have never been very good at composting cooked food scraps. I decided that this was something we could easily change and we now have a dedicated bin for food waste in the kitchen. It has proved useful to see just how much food ends up in the bin over a week. After one week there was 4kg of scraps in the kitchen bin (Figure 2 left), which was put in a dedicated composting bin in the garden (Figure 2 right).

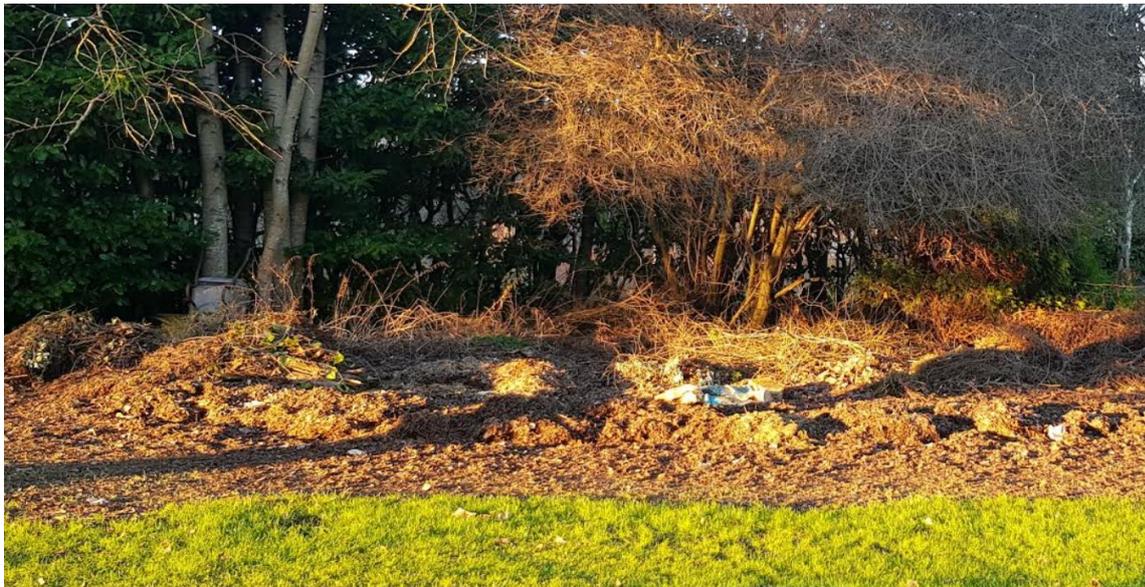


**Figure 2** Left – kitchen food waste bin  
Right Food waste composting bin

### Composting More Garden Waste

We have a place in the garden where all the garden waste, leaves, grass plant cuttings is dumped (Figure 3). It is very unsightly and has been made even more unsightly by the chickens who rummage around in it and scatter it. Over time the edge of the heap has progressed 5m into the garden killing the grass. Furthermore, the heap is very poor at breaking down the plant materials so that it can be recycled as compost.

**Figure 3** Our messy garden waste heap before reorganising it.



I have toyed with building a compost bin for many years! But this week I decided to do something about it. I watched a couple of YouTube videos on compost bins and had a better idea about how to structure them so that they are more effective. I built the enclosure from fence panels and spent the best part of two days digging redistributing the waste heap and creating a new and structured composting bin. The results are shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4** New compost bin and garden waste heap



## Wasting Less Water

**How much water do you use in a typical day?** I didn't know the answer to this question so I spent a day trying to be conscious of what I used. This is what I came up with.

- Cleaning teeth – two tumblers of water 0.5L
- Shower – 2mins, mixer shower about 15L
- Drinks – teas, coffees, water - 2L
- Toilet – flushed 4x - 40L
- Cooking – 2L
- Washing hands – 3L
- Washing/rinsing dishes – 6L

This estimate of 60L didn't include dishwasher or washing machine which were not used on that day. It is far lower than the 143L of water that is reported for the average daily water consumption per person in the UK.

Wasting water has always bothered me and it is not just about the cost (we are metred) it is about feeling a sense of wastefulness. But I know that some of my habits are wasteful. For example, I run the tap while cleaning my teeth. I run the shower and taps until warm water flows, I flush the toilet when I don't really need to flush it. These are habits that I can easily change and either save water or using the water I was wasting.

So from this week I cleaned my teeth with one beaker of water. If I needed hot water for a shave, I ran the tap refilling a beaker until the water was hot enough. I empty the 10 beakers into the toilet next to the sink which helps to flush it. In the shower I now have a plastic bowl and I run the cold water into it until it gets warm, I also stand over the bowl as I shower and it fills with soapy water. I use the water to flush the toilet. With a little effort I probably save or reuse perhaps 15L of water a day. Its only a small amount of water but it adds up each day and it makes me feel better that I am not so wasteful. More importantly, it shows how with a little self awareness it is easy to change habits to live a life that is more considerate of the resources we use.

**Figure 5** Changing my teeth cleaning, shaving and showering habits to save a bit of water



## Reflections

As the Gaia course reminds us we all consume resources and create waste. Much of our behaviour is habitual: we don't think about or question what we are doing. It starts with awareness (cognition)

and this connects to emotions, usually negative emotions like feeling guilty, or dissatisfaction with self and eventually we become concerned and dissatisfied to care enough to do something about it. In a way the Gaia course makes this public. It encourages the development of understanding and action and a forum for sharing of effects. Just making me think about my wasteful habits was useful, but the encouragement to act was even more useful and I found it quick and easy to make some changes to my everyday habits that mean I am slightly less wasteful and more productive as a recycler (see my new map of wasteful habits Figure 6).

I have to recognise that I am a major creator of waste in the garden as I cut the grass, prune trees and gather fallen leaves. But I have neglected for many years my role as an agent for recycling these wasteful products. In building the compost bins and restructuring the garden waste heap I feel I have achieved something useful to help the garden ecosystem and I look forwards to seeing the benefits of my work in future. The benefit to me is that I now have a tidier garden which appeals to my aesthetic sense when I look at it. Another benefit is as the compost develops, I will have a useful resource for the garden.

The fact that I feel good about doing these things reflects the intrinsic value such changes have on personal wellbeing.

**Figure 6** New map of our wasteful habits

