

WEEK  
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## Terror Firma

I've built . . . full-sized ovens in half a day.  
— Kiko Denzer, *Build Your Own Earth Oven*, 2007

### How to Build an Earth Oven in a Weekend; or, A Recipe for Disaster

1. Set aside a *month* of weekends, because regardless of what Kiko Denzer writes (and preaches in Maine), that's closer to what you're going to need.
2. Drag your son out of bed at the crack of dawn and, using pickax and shovel, dig a footing deep enough to reach the frost line (allegedly forty inches in my neighborhood, but you may have to settle for less) and wide enough for a grave, because before the project is over, you're going to want to kill yourself, I guarantee it. With any luck, you will strike clay, which you should set aside for the oven itself, which you will get around to building later. Much later.
3. Instead of simply ordering a load of stone from your local building-supply company, who would dump it in a convenient location adjacent to the hole, follow Denzer's posthippie admonition to fill your footing/grave with "urbanite," his word\*

\*Some potentially dangerous confusion here: I was ready to fill my hole with Upper West Siders I'd recruited from a New York City Starbucks before I realized Kiko had totally redefined an established word.

- for the debris you scavenge in your yard and neighborhood. As much work as this is, it does have the advantage of cleaning your yard of old bird feeders, hardened sacks of mortar mix, lawn mowers, and other junk your town won't take.
4. After a day of lugging all this debris to the foundation, make half a dozen trips to your local home center to buy bags of stone, because all that damned urbanite you scavenged filled only a third of your enormous hole, and the small stones you pour in just vanish at an impossible rate.
  5. Crawl out of bed the next day and start to build a base for the oven so you won't have to bake lying on your stomach.
  6. Instead of buying those easy-to-assemble interlocking bricks used for building retaining walls, insist (for aesthetic reasons) on using old-fashioned red brick for the base. Construct a four-foot cylinder of said brick, three feet high, taking pains to keep the structure level on your sloping site. Don't bother using mortar, for mortar is messy and time-consuming, and besides, it seems to me that there will be no place for the brick to go once the cylinder is filled with yet more fill (see steps 3–4) and the thing is topped with a heavy oven (see steps . . . uh, well, we won't be getting that far this weekend. Or next).
  7. As the brick wall rises, continue filling with more debris. And more. After several hours of stripping your yard of anything that isn't moving, you may be tempted to loosen your definition of "debris" somewhat, but resist the urge to go after low-hanging fruit, such as loose stones from an existing wall, the foundation of your home, or the neighbor's cat. Trust me on this, especially if your wife has a sharp eye.
  8. When the last layer of brick is in place, top off with small stones to fill in the gaps between the larger pieces of fill. Smooth with hands, then step back to watch, with horror,

as the entire structure collapses, the fill pouring out like flour from a broken sack.

9. Open a beer. Rebuild next weekend, using mortar.