

COMPOSTING WITH WORMS

Vermicomposting is the process of having red worms and other decomposer organisms process our organic waste and turn it into a great natural fertilizer (vermicompost).

THE WORM BIN:

All vermicomposting starts with a bin. The bins can be as simple as 5 gallon buckets to complex commercially made systems. Systems that allow for upward migration and/or zones make for the easiest harvesting.

The bins should have drainage holes in the bottom and a system to catch any moisture that drains off, as well as air holes in the top or otherwise not be airtight.

Upward migration systems, allow the worms to move up through several bins. This means the lower bins should be more composted than the upper bins. This system makes harvesting the compost much easier and results in fewer worms being removed from the bin.

A zone system is a bin large enough to be divided into several areas. In this system, materials are placed in a specific zone for a time and then materials are placed in other zones. You can harvest each zone of compost at different times. This system isn't as easy to maintain and can result in larger amounts of worms being removed from the bin.

WHERE TO KEEP YOUR BIN:

The worms should be kept in a temperature range of 40 to 80 degrees. Garages and/or basements are ideal locations to store your bin. However, bins can be kept anywhere indoors: spare bedrooms, kitchens, etc. They don't smell or make noise so don't worry about keeping your worms in your house – you'll never even know they're there.

In the summer, keep an additional bin outside with a handful of your worms thrown in, if you'd like for extra produce resulting from canning and/or all those grass clippings or leaves. However, don't expect the worms to make it through the winter.

BEDDING:

Give your worms a bedding of shredded newspaper that has been dampened with water. This also gives your compost some “brown” matter to balance out your compost’s ph. Use only the non-glossy portions of the paper (no sales flyers, etc.).

THE WORMS:

Earthworms are soil worms and will not work in your composting bin. You must use red worms, often called red wigglers. There are two breeds to use for worm composting: *Eisenia foetida* & *Lumbricus rubellus* – both are commonly sold as red wigglers or red worms.

CARE & FEEDING OF THE WORMS:

The worms will process any organic matter. The best things to put in your bin are your vegetable scraps (think carrot peels, onion cores, leftover steamed veggies, etc.), shredded newspaper & cardboard, 100% cotton (old t-shirts, etc.), grass and leaf clippings, etc. Avoid meat products because of maggot problems and smell.

A word of caution: You can put fruit scraps in your worm bin, however; this can and usually does attract fruit flies – while annoying not necessarily dangerous. If you do notice fruit flies, you can make a simple trap: Fill an empty jar half full with beer, secure a plastic bag around the opening with a rubber band, so that a corner of the bag is sticking down into the jar, poke a hole in the corner of the bag with a pencil. The fruit flies will fly in but not get out. Empty the jar contents every week and start over until flies disappear.

Like any living creature your worms need food, water, and air. Keeping the bedding moistened is more than enough water for your worms.

For faster processing, chop your food scraps into small pieces, this allows the worms to more quickly process them and gives you usable compost faster. 1 pound of worms will eat about 2 pounds of food per week.

The worms also enjoy manure: Scrape your horse manure, chicken manure and bedding materials into a specific area and throw in a handful of worms to break it down more quickly for your garden beds. Scrape rabbit, hamster, and guinea pig bedding materials and manure into a bin with a few worms to process that quickly into manure. You can also use red wigglers in composting toilets for quicker processing.

HARVESTING & USING YOUR COMPOST:

Once a layer or zone is completely broken down, harvest your compost. Simply put into containers for later use or spread onto your garden and/or flower pots immediately. ***Don't worry about losing a few worms during the harvesting, they reproduce quickly.***

You will notice some "worm water" leaking from the bottom layer of your bin. Harvest this and use as compost tea. This "worm water" is full of nutrients and is great on houseplants and your garden. For houseplants, you may want to thin it with water (1:1 is a good ratio).

Use worm compost as you would regular garden compost: mix in with your garden soil, plant it with your seeds, start seeds in it with a mixture of regular soil, etc.

THINNING YOUR "HERD":

Red Wiggler worms reproduce rapidly (in ideal conditions, the population doubles every month), so don't be afraid to give a few worms away to friends starting their own bin or use a few for that fishing trip.

RESOURCES:

Worms Eat My Garbage by Mary Appelhof – The original vermicomposting resource.

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