

Harvesting the Compost

There are several methods of harvesting compost or worms. The most convenient is to move the castings to one side of the box and add new bedding (dampened) and food waste to the other. Feed only on the new side. Covering only the new side of the bedding will encourage worms to travel to the darker side to feed. After 2 to 3 weeks, most of the worms should have migrated to the new side and you can harvest the castings. Add fresh bedding to the vacant side and begin feeding again in the alternate pattern.

What is in the compost?

Worm compost is called "castings." It is the end product of the worms' digestive process from which plants derive beneficial nutrients.



Small (1/8th-inch) whitish round "eggs" are egg casings from which baby worms emerge. Baby red wigglers are white and about a half-inch long. Sometimes other insects may find their way into the box. These are not harmful but aid in the composting process. Do not permit slugs or snails in the box as they eat the worms and worm eggs.



Additional Information

All about worm composting.
<http://whatcom.wsu.edu/ag/compost/Redwormsedit.htm>

Build a cheap and easy worm bin,
<http://whatcom.wsu.edu/ag/compost/Redwormsedit.htm>

A larger worm bin,
<http://whatcom.wsu.edu/ag/compost/wormbins.htm>

Worms Eat My Garbage: How to setup & maintain a vermicomposting system by Mary Appelhof. ISBN: 0-942256-10-7

REDUCE
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Composting with Red Wiggler Worms

What is worm box composting?

Vermiculture, or worm box composting, is a process in which red wiggler worms (also called manure worms) and micro-organisms are used to convert kitchen fruit and vegetable waste into nutrient-rich, black humus. Gardens and potted plants love the addition, becoming healthier and more robust.

Will any worm work?

No, not all worm species do the same job. You'll need red wiggler worms to most efficiently complete this process. These worms live in the top twelve inches of the soil and are most readily found at the bottom of a compost pile. They have a red stripe around each segment and react strongly to light with considerable writhing activity.

One pound of worms can consume 50 pounds of kitchen waste in 90 days!

What about the worms' home?

The worm "box" does not have to be a wooden box. The most important factors are that the container be opaque to block light, and that it be at least 12 to 18 inches deep. An opaque plastic storage box with lid, a Styrofoam cooler, or a wooden box made from plywood all work well. The WSU Extension office has plans for a variety of worm boxes. The length and width of the box is determined by available space, convenience, and the amount of waste to dispose of each week.

Setting up the box...

Drill several small holes in the bottom of the box for drainage and several more just under the lid to provide air circulation.

Fill up the box to the top with bedding material: strips of newspaper, shredded computer paper, torn up corrugated cardboard, or dry leaves. These materials need to be dampened (not soggy) with water from a spray bottle. Do not pack the bedding tight, but "fluff" the material. You will need one or two handfuls of soil to provide grit for the worms' gizzard used to process their food.

Cover the top of the box with a lid or some other opaque cover.



Care of red wigglers...

Red wiggler worms are easy to care for. Kept slightly damp, fed regularly, and with adequate bedding, they can be ignored most of the time. You may go on vacation for two weeks and not worry about having someone to care for them.

There are two points to remember:

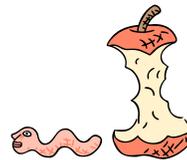
1. Living conditions need to be moist - not soggy, not dry. Usually the food provides sufficient moisture.
2. Ideal temperature range is 55 to 77 degrees F - do not allow to freeze or allow prolonged exposure to direct sunlight.

What's on the menu?

Red wigglers are vegetarians. They also have favorite foods; for example, they will eat citrus fruits but much prefer melons. Non-meat, non-dairy and non-fat refrigerated leftovers, even if moldy, are okay to add.

The food should be buried about 2/3 the depth into the bedding on an alternating pattern. This encourages the worms to travel through the bedding and consume it also.

Some food products should **NOT** be fed to the worms. They include meat, bones, fat, eggs, or dairy products. This menu means **NO** pizza, fish, peanut butter, sour cream, potato chips, cheese, salad dressings, butter, gravy and **NO** pet manures.



Wiggler Menu

Breakfast - Unbuttered toast, pancakes, oatmeal, muffins, cereal, fruit scraps, crushed egg shells.

Lunch & Dinner - All vegetable and fruit scraps, corn, broccoli, cabbage, onion, beans, leftover potatoes, green salad, tomatoes, squash, carrots, peas, pasta, bread, rice.

Dessert - Melons, bananas, pineapples, apples, grapes, peaches, plums, berries, baked good without frosting.

Beverages - Coffee grounds with filters, tea bags without plastic tags.

Side orders - Dead flowers, leaves, dead plants (non-diseased).

(Avoid salty foods)

Can anything go wrong?

A healthy worm box has very little or no odor. If your box smells like anything else but damp earth, something may be wrong. A sick, dead smell may be dead worms. Check your moisture level. If too wet, add more dry bedding. If too dry, add moisture. If all worms are dead, empty box and start over.

If the box smells like rotting food, you may be over-feeding your worms. Remove some food or wait until food in the box is nearly gone before adding more. Worms need feeding only 2 or 3 times a week. Save scraps in tightly covered container and add to the box as needed.