

ASK A MASTER GARDENER

Worms in the garden



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Master Gardener

Question: I am a home gardener and have recently seen vermicomposting gaining more and more popularity. I am looking to start my own bin, but I'm not sure where to start? Can you please tell me more about using worms in the garden?

Answer: As food costs rise and the home garden space grows, more and more people are looking for ways to increase their harvest without paying the price for over the counter fertilizers. Well, look no further because worms might be just the ticket. More specifically, vermicomposting, or using worms to quickly break down organic materials and turn them into a usable soil amendment, also known as castings. These red wigglers, which are specific to composting piles and different from earthworms, can eat half of their full body weight in scraps every single day. This makes them extremely beneficial to your compost pile and garden beds. So, put on your gloves, grab a handful of worms and let's get started.

Vermicomposting is an inexpensive and beginner-friendly way to take things you would otherwise throw away and put them to good use. Items such as food scraps, shredded paper, and yard trimmings are great examples of organic materials that worms are able to consume.

To begin, you will need a home for your new little creatures. A quick search online will yield an endless selection of containers specific to worm farming ranging in size, color, style and price. Although these are fun and appealing to look



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Vermicomposting uses worms to break down organic materials and turn it into a usable soil amendment



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at, an average size, dark colored storage tote (roughly 18 gallons) with a lid works just as well and can help to keep the cost down. Using a quarter-inch drill bit, drill air holes every few inches around the upper sides of the tote. There is no need to drill drainage holes on the bottom. For the interior



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Red worms are a common species used in vermicomposting.

of the bin, you will need a brick or two of coco coir (the outer husk of coconuts) which can be found at most garden supply stores, shredded paper to help control moisture and a bucket full of native or store-bought

potting soil. You will then moisten the bedding with water to the point of being moist, but not soggy. This will reduce your chances of mold. If you find that you have added too much water or if your bin gains

too much liquid over time, feel free to add more bedding to soak up the excess moisture.

The worms themselves can be purchased locally or online from reputable sources. More often than not, you will find red worms (*Eisenia fetida*) or red wigglers sold by the thousands, which might sound like a lot, but it is amazing how many can fit in a single colony. They will live just under the surface of the soil and work tirelessly converting your scraps into a beautiful soil enhancer, so long as the conditions are right. If you ever notice a foul odor or pests affecting your bin, you will need to address the issue promptly.

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Some common issues affecting the quality of your vermicompost are not burying the food scraps underneath the soil surface which can attract fruit flies, not chopping the scraps into smaller pieces, over-feeding which gives the scraps too much time to rot, and too much moisture buildup.

After a few months of feeding your worms and maintaining proper moisture, you will be left with a rich, dark material often referred to as “Black

Gold” because of its incredible nutrient density. These castings can then be placed by the scoop-full into plant holes when setting out seedlings or raked into established garden beds. Vermicompost is a readily available food source for your plants and, by amending your soil with compost-rich materials, it is possible to create a successful in-ground garden space. Even those of us who will be using raised beds or containers this year can benefit greatly from adding castings to store-bought soil products.

For more information

on how to start your own worm bin, be sure to attend the free vermicomposting 101 class presented by the OSU Extension office from 3:30-5:30 p.m. April 19.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.