

fine Gardening

Published in September/October 2008

Worms Keep Composting Through the Winter

Around this time of year many gardeners are putting their compost piles to bed in preparation for cooler temperatures. The joys of composting, however, don't have to end when autumn sets in. Indoor worm composting is a method of recycling household food scraps into rich, organic matter. This compost, referred to as vermicompost can be used in gardens or containers to enrich soil for healthier, more vigorous plants. In addition to the benefits for the garden, indoor worm composting can be fun and it's easy to succeed if you follow a few simple guidelines.

BINS NEED TO BREATHE

Worms are a team of small eating machines, needing air, moisture, comfortable temperatures, and darkness to thrive, so providing a proper holding bin is essential. The best type of bin for indoor composting is made out of wood because it breathes and provides the right amount of air circulation. Exterior grade plywood works well because it lets excess moisture evaporate and therefore doesn't seep, promote muddy bottom layers, or foster anaerobic (smelly) conditions often found with plastic bins. Although most pressure treated wood no longer contains arsenic, untreated plywood is still probably a safer bet for the worms. A bin with a surface area at least 2 feet across and 18 inches wide, with a depth of only about 1 foot provides the best air circulation. Composting worms don't tunnel like garden worms; instead, they live communally near the surface of the bin. Worms like it moist and dark, so a loose fitting piece of black plastic on top of the bin will help ensure the optimum conditions.

PICK THE PROPER PLACE

Cold worms seem to slow down and eat much less, inhibiting the composting process, so find a safe indoor location for your bin, protected from direct heat or cold, where temperatures stay between 50 and 80 degrees. We have heard of successful composting in colder temperatures, but have no first hand knowledge.

BEDDING SHOULD BE ALL NATURAL

The bedding material is the worms' living environment and auxiliary food source. Use shredded leaves (except acidic oak leaves); fall garden debris; and manure mixed with coir, made from coconut husks. Leaves naturally deodorize the bin and will introduce composting organisms which help breakdown food so it is easier for the worms to eat. Always moisten the bedding well

because worms need a damp environment to survive. Check if your bedding is wet enough--but not too wet--by squeezing a handful. If only a few drops come out, it's just right. Because air is essential to the success of your bin, add hollow plant stems (like sunflowers), corn cobs, or egg shells to the bedding. These provide pockets of air essential for the survival of worms and other composting organisms.

PROVIDE SOFT FOOD

Soft, mushy food is the best meal for your toothless worms. Tofu, fat-free cottage cheese, soup stock veggies, and frosted lettuce are all good candidates. Whatever you feed the worms should be soft, liquidy, or have had its cell walls broken down by spoilage, cooking, freezing, or thawing. Raw and whole food will take much longer to become edible. Some crops, like carrots, broccoli, and members of the cabbage family have a lot of woody fibers which keep them from breaking down for a long time. The food should provide enough moisture for a healthy environment, but you still need to monitor the bin to be sure the conditions do not get very dry. It is essential to bury all food under a layer of bedding to avoid flies and rotten smells.

DETERMINE THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF WORMS

Eisenia fetida is the Latin name for the species of worms that specialize in composting. They are usually sold by the pound from mail order sources. One pound of wigglers can eat one pound of food, every two days. A small household on average produces weekly kitchen scraps that will accommodate 2 to 3 pounds of worms. When you introduce the worms to their new home observe how long it takes them to eat most of the initial offerings. If it's gone in a few days you will need to feed more, if it sits for more than a week, you may need more worms.

CASTINGS ARE GARDENER'S GOLD

Castings are worm poop, which is produced at the end of the composting process. After about 3 months, the castings will build up on the bin floor for you to harvest. The best bins have a front door that allows access to the castings without disturbing the worms. But if you don't have a bin with easy access, be sure to sift out any worms, bright yellow worm eggs, uneaten food, or bedding that you may accidentally scoop out and return them to the bin. The castings are immediately ready for use as fertilizer. This compost will give your plants the essential nutrients they need to grow to their full potential. Castings also have fungicidal properties which can fight mildew, scab and many other plant diseases. The benefits of worm composting are endless so consider installing a bin in your home; it's sure to be fun, functional, and great conversation piece at your next party.

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