

Worms are wonderful garbage disposers. In ideal situations they can eat equivalent to their body weight of food scraps a day. Worm castings are a rich soil conditioner or plant food.

Setting up a worm farm

- You can use small containers (such as a Styrofoam box) with drainage, or purchase a commercially produced worm farm.
- Locate the container in a shaded area that will not get too hot or too cold; worms prefer internal temperatures between 20 and 25°C.
- Place a few sheets of moistened newspaper on the base of the tray. Some commercial bins include cardboard for this.
- The worms need bedding to live in. Bedding is easy to make. It is a mixture of shredded newspaper and either composted horse or cow manure, worm castings or coco peat or coir peat (available from nurseries). Add some soil for grit, then add water so that the mixture is as wet as a lightly squeezed sponge (ie, you can just squeeze drops from it). Some commercial bins include a fibre material for use as bedding.
- Make the layer of bedding 10-15cm deep.
- Add 1000-2000 worms to the surface. There is no need to bury them as they will quickly move away from the light (refer next page for worm suppliers).
- Cover with a damp hessian sack or newspaper and leave for a week. This allows the worms to adapt to their new home.

Adding food scraps

- Begin adding small amounts of food scraps in shallow troughs.
- Only add more food scraps when the worms have worked through the existing scraps. After a number of months, you will be able to increase the amount of food.
- Add small sprinklings of lime if a lot of acidic materials (fruit peelings, etc.) are used.
- Shredding food scraps will speed up the worm system.
- Add water if the bedding material becomes drier than a lightly squeezed sponge

Harvesting worms and castings from a single box

When most of the container has been converted to castings (worm manure) you can harvest the castings and the worms as follows:

- Empty the contents of the container onto a table or other flat surface.
- Leave the material for a few minutes to allow worms to bury away from the surface.
- Scrape away the outside layer of material. This should be mostly free of worms.
- Leave the material again to allow the worms to burrow further.
- Continue scraping the castings away, layer by layer.
- At the end, you will be left with a ball of worms, ready to use again.

Uses for worm produce

- Plant food — add a 3-6cm layer of castings around plants and the drip line of trees. Cover with mulch. Dilute the worm juice so that it is the colour of weak tea. Pour the juice around the drip line. You can also use diluted worm juice as a fertilizer.
- Potting mix — add 10-20% castings to a poor potting mix.

COMMON PROBLEMS AND QUESTIONS

How can you help the worms eat faster?

- Shred or mash the food scraps.
- Don't add too much acidic food such as citrus fruits and garlic. Add garden lime with these.
- Keep the worm system at around 24 °C.

Apart from food scraps, what else can I feed my worms?

- Worms also like soaked and ripped pizza boxes and egg cartons, cardboard and paper.
- You can feed worms composted manures. Fresh manure will heat up and may contain vermicides if the animal has recently been treated for worms.
- Garden materials are best composted.

What are the little white worm-like creatures?

- These are not compost worms, but another type of worm. They indicate acidic conditions. Add a little garden lime to lower the acidity.

There are ants in the worm system - what do I do?

- This is a sign that the worm system has become too dry and acidic.
- Moisten the system and add lime.
- If ants persist, isolate them by placing the supports of the worm system in containers of water.

There are lots of small flies. Are these a problem?

- These are vinegar flies. They are not a problem, but an indication that you are overfeeding your worm system. Reduce the feeding rate to help.

My worm system has maggots, what should I do?

- These are most likely soldier fly larvae (about a 2-3 cm long and heavily segmented) or vinegar fly larvae (6 mm long). Both of these are beneficial — as they help break down the food scraps.
- To remove larvae, apply garden lime, or leave some bread soaked in milk at the surface. Remove after 2-3 days.

My worm bin smells. What should I do?

- This is a sign of anaerobic conditions. Stop feeding and stir the material with a small fork. Add garden lime.
- Only resume feeding when smells have gone.

There are worms in the collector tray. What should I do?

- The worms need a path to return to the upper trays. An ice-cream container covered with moist newspaper should work.

Where can I buy a worm farm?

Worm farms can be bought from most nurseries and hardware stores, or online. Worm farms and compost bins are available to purchase from Council at the Greenplan Nursery on any third Friday of the month or on Greenplan Sale Days.

Where can I buy start-up worms?

Worms can be purchased from a variety of sources including local worm farmers, some nurseries and hardware stores. Contacts for local worm farmers can be found in the yellow pages, under "Worm Farming".

References

Earth Works Participants Notes, NSW Environment Protection Authority, August, 1996.
The Worm Factory, Questions and Answers, Reln Plastics, Pty Ltd.
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Disclaimers

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