

Worms and the Garden Compost Pile

All compost can be improved when worms are present in the pile.

Worms mix the minerals and organic matter in garden waste with enzymes present inside the worm's gut. This "lignin" acts like a glue to hold all this material together, making the minerals and nutrients more available to the plant in a slow-release form.

Food wastes will disappear quicker when compost worms are on the job!

Worm-Improved Composts – The Value of Vermicast

Compost that has been worked by a worm is very special material called Vermicast. Vermicast is a wonderful soil conditioner, richer with healthy bacteria and soil life than ordinary compost. Vermicast has been shown to increase seed germination rates, grow healthier plants, and hold more moisture than ordinary garden compost.

Vermicast is nature's finest soil conditioner!

Regular use of vermicast will also help invite Earthworms into your garden's soil. Compost worms are not Earthworms, but they can help make your soils more attractive to these Earth-worker worms.

Using Vermicast

Vermicast can be applied in small amounts, so it covers more garden than ordinary compost. Used as a solid or liquid, vermicast will not burn even the most sensitive of plants. And, Vermicast can be used on all plants: house plants, garden annuals or perennials, veggies, fruit trees and grass.

The key to using Vermicast is this: A little goes a long way!

Here are some ideas on how to use Vermicast in the Garden:

- Use a handful in the potting hole for all new plantings (less for plugs, more for 10 inch pots).
- Dig a handful into the root zone of established plants. If applied as a top mulch, dig into the top 3-inches of soil, as vermicast can dry into a crust if left on the soil surface.
- Mix with peat in a 20% mixture for an excellent seed-raising media, or with ordinary compost for a rich potting mix. Vermicast makes a wonderful addition to your DIY soil preparations.
- Add to container plants, as it holds moisture better than ordinary compost and provides concentrated slow-release nutrition as the plant needs it.
- Turn into a liquid for a foliar spray or soil application: Add 2-3 handfuls vermicast to a 15-litre bucket of water. Stir in a tablespoon of some simple sugar (raw sugar, molasses, fruit juice), and perhaps a fish liquid fertiliser, to feed the good bacteria in the vermicast. Leave for up to 3 hours, stirring occasionally. To use, Dilute 1:10 (to a lite brown colour of weak tea) and apply to the point of run-off (foliar) or 1 litre per square meter. Discard any unused amount after 24 hours.

Garden Composting

Garden composting relies on microbes to heat the pile up in order to break down the fibrous garden-waste. However, the reality is, most piles of garden waste just sit there and rarely heat up. This is because the average household cannot build a pile large enough to develop the heat-action critical for decomposition. Enter the compost worm to speed things up! Although they don't like the heat, worms can dive down to cooler areas to wait it out.

To maintain a healthy worm population in your Garden Compost:

- Never allow the compost pile to dry out – This means watering every week during the heat of the summer.
- Feed the pile regular amounts of kitchen scraps, rotating feeding sites around the same general area. Worms do not thrive on a diet of wood chips and twigs!
- Sprinkle ordinary garden lime (calcium carbonate) onto layers of garden waste and food scraps. Rock phosphates and rock dust are good minerals to add.
- Fluff the pile monthly, to add air into the layers. Try laying long sticks across the pile and shifting up and down. A cork-screw style compost tool can also be used to stir the pile vertically from above.
- Add leafy garden material in layers, and avoid thick layers of fresh grass, which tend to get hot and become compact. Instead, dry the grass a day or two before adding it to the garden compost pile.
- Worms love coffee grounds, but sprinkle in thin layers as these too heat up.
- Smaller-sized material will break-down quicker, so chipping is a real plus;
- Keep the pile covered with a tarp or piece of wool carpet. This encourages worms to the surface, slows down evaporation of water, and block-out birds & excess rain.
- Add Compost Worms (Tiger Worms, Red Wigglers) to the pile to ensure you have the right worm for the job, as not all worms are Compost Worms. The more you start with, the quicker your worm population will establish itself.
- Expect that the worms will seem to disappear at first, digging deep out of the sunlight. Worms will take several months for their population to “take hold”.

Instructions:

Make a hole in the surface of the compost pile and add Compost Worms, including any paper from the packing. Feed food scraps on top of worms, and cover with a bit of compost or carpet. Keep adding all fruit and veggie scraps to this general area, rotating sites at each feed. Harvest compost from the older parts of the pile, like the bottom or the areas not recently fed. Dump the rich black compost onto your garden bench and wait for the light to drive the worms down, away from the light. Keep removing worms from the top until you have nothing left but wiggly worms – You can return these critters to the compost.



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