

Keeping A Healthy Worm Farm

Worms are surprisingly easy pets to keep. In a bin constructed with Rubbermaid bins kept supplied with kitchen vegetable waste and a monthly or so rotation of bins, your worms will continue to consume the waste, turning it into valuable, natural organic fertilizer for your garden. A bonus liquid plant food is obtained from the liquid drained off the top two bins. Dilute this concentrate with 10 parts water and feed your potted plants.

Understanding how worms exist is important to understanding how the bins function in your worm farm. Normally, worms live in the ground, where it is cool, dark and moist, and most important, filled with decaying vegetable matter like dead tree roots and decomposing leaves. They don't actually eat the materials... but eat the slime created after the initial microbial action starts rotting the stuff. When worms can't find food where they are in the ground, they will travel to where there is fresh food, laterally, over miles in their lifetimes. Worms also travel up and down, for comfort and survival. When it rains, you may see worms come to the surface of soil for a while. They are avoiding being drowned by traveling to the top where rain has drained to layers below. Likewise, on a hot dry day, they will travel down to where it is cooler and moister. In hot climates and dry summers, they will most likely be underground in the moister earth in the shade of trees.

It is this same migration from up to down that will enable your worms to get the fresh food in the top bin, traveling from the surface of the compost through the holes you have drilled for them. It is crucial to make sure your holes are at least a quarter inch thick... and that the bin is sitting directly on top of the mixture in the bin below, like you would be stacking the bins for storage, one inside the other. They can't rise to the new stuff, as they lack the ability to pull themselves up to the holes, unless there is direct contact. They will really only travel up to that bin when there is new food and they are done with the lower bin. Keep the bins moist. If they dry out, the worms will want to travel south again to the lower bin for wetter conditions, and you don't want that.

Resist the temptation to keep adding food to the one bin they are starting in because it will get very heavy as the food scraps are eaten and the castings become the new form: compost. It can get dense and mucky. Keep it at half full for ease in lifting. I had more vegetable scraps than I could put in the one worm farm, and found out the hard way to not overload. The sheer weight of both bins started to make the bottom bin squash and cave.

By the way, you DO NOT want this inside. It can get messy, and you will want to hose it periodically to maintain moisture. If you want an indoor worm farm, buy the 100 dollar one. It is for very light use, with few vegetable clippings, and constructed of harder plastic. We had daily coffee grounds, lots of vegetable scraps, old refrigerator potatoes, etc., daily, so that little doll house one wouldn't work. But it is worth a look at it (they have one set up and working at Harmony Farm Supply on Hwy 116 in Sebastopol). You can buy worms there, too. I got my worms from a friend who had a worm farm and plenty to share. These are small red worms, not the big nightcrawlers you use for fishing.

What to put inside: Coffee grounds, tea bags, shredded paper towel roll, most kitchen scrap material, except for egg shells and citrus peels. Shredded newspaper helps keep a balance of airiness to slime. I threw in some finely ground coconut husk growing material (looks like peat moss). Rotten fruit and vegetables from the fridge. NEVER put in grease, meat scraps, or non food stuff except for paper, cardboard, egg carton material. If you toss in some potting soil, make sure it doesn't have perlite (white component of commercial potting soil for drainage) as it can cut the worms, as will egg shells. Chopping the scraps into smaller pieces makes it easier to begin the microbial rotting. I got lazy and put it all in whole... and it took longer for them to eat. I preferred not to add avocado pits and peels, corn cobs, nut shells, since they take so long to decompose, they were always in my garden compost. Not a danger. If you just want, just bury it deeper, or toss it back into the worm farm.

When you first lift that bin to rotate it to the top, you can see your red or pink pets wiggling. You will see tiny ones as well, little babies! You can be sure the farm is teeming with worm eggs, as the worms will populate if the food is there. I got most of this from the internet, but had a lovely chat with the Worm Lady at Food For Thought the Food Bank in Forestville, who gave me more information. You can visit that lovely garden, too.

Finally, when it comes time to put that compost in the garden, be careful to not hurt any worms that remained. Give these stowaways a new home in your garden.