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Garbage is gourmet feast for worms

It! – Even if you don't have grounds to fertilize, a worm bin can be a tiny trash compactor

BY JENNIFER WILLIS
LocalNewsDaily.com, 14.3 hours ago

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I have a box of worms in courtyard.

I live in a condo. I'm wary of the garbage disposal, not certain that the sewer system can really handle that kind of garbage. There's no backyard for a big compost bin, which can get pretty stinky – I don't want to make enemies of my neighbors. I also don't want to keep throwing food scraps in the trash.

A friend recommended worms. I thought he was kidding. He wasn't.

Worm composting – also called vermicomposting – is great for smaller living spaces, like condos and apartments, and eliminates the foul odors associated with other kinds of composting. With the right moisture and ventilation, the worms quickly break down kitchen and paper scraps.

Commercially made worm bins are available from about \$30 and up – some small enough to store under the kitchen sink or on the counter. There are even worm bins that double as furniture, like a composting patio bench or a custom-made vermicomposting coffee table.

A die-hard do-it-yourselfer, I found simple instructions online for constructing my own system. I bought a couple of plastic storage bins at Fred Meyer and drilled holes for ventilation and drainage. With plenty of shredded newspaper for worm bedding, and lots of kitchen scraps, I was ready for worms.

For composting, all worms are not created equal, and the garden-variety earthworm won't get the job done. I needed what are commonly known as "red wigglers" or red worms. Available at bait shops, they can be found less



New vermicomposter Jennifer Willis shows off her handiwork: a home for her trash-eating worms.

JIM CLARK / THE PORTLAND TRIBUNE

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expensively through garden stores, mail-order suppliers or on eBay. Even Craigslist has composting worms posted.

A local Freecycler, Felicia Kilger, was willing to share some of her red wigglers with me. Free worms! Kilger started worm composting two years ago, after getting impatient with her slow-processing traditional compost bin. She added some worms.

“The worms eat more quickly than I expected,” she says. They also multiply rapidly, so she has plenty to share.

“I feel better about having less waste,” Kilger says. “I guess that’s the Oregonian in me.”

Kilger keeps her bin out of sight at the side of her house. She was surprised that worm composting requires very little maintenance. “Just throw them in your bin, and they’ll do the rest.”

Beth Meredith and Eric Storm keep their Worm Factory system (about \$85) on the porch of their Northwest Portland condo.

“We’re very much urban worm composters,” Storm says. They’ve been vermicomposting for nearly 10 years and have helped friends set up their own systems.

Storm’s advice is simple: “Do it.”

They suggest using old bank statements and credit card offers as worm bedding, to dispose of sensitive information securely and conscientiously. “It’s our paper shredder,” Meredith says.

Worms prefer a vegetarian diet – my worms love watermelon rinds, fresh onion and coffee grounds. Keeping the bin free of meat and dairy products keeps foul odors from developing, and won’t attract scavenging animals.

The resulting compost is rich in nutrients and can be used to create healthier plants – in the garden and in pots. “Worm tea” – the liquid runoff that drains out of the bin – is great for houseplants.

My neighbors made faces and joked about not wanting to find any escapees on their porches when I told them about my composting project. Now, friends donate their kitchen scraps to feed my worms. In a couple of months, I’ll have plenty of compost to share.

My one regret? I wish I’d started with bigger bins.

Recommended reading

- “Worms Eat My Garbage,” by Mary Appelhof

On the Web

- Mary Appelhof’s

www.wormwoman.com

- Digital Composter at www.digitalseed.com

Start your own worm composting

Get two plastic storage bins (with lids), about 8-10 gallons each.

Drill 10 1/16” holes along each side of the bins, near the upper rim, for

ventilation (and to prevent fruit flies).

Drill 20 1/4" holes in the bottom of each bin for drainage.

Fill one bin with 3 to 4 inches of damp strips of newspaper. (Moisten by soaking in water and then squeezing out the excess.) Set the other bin aside.

Add 1/2 to 1 pound of red wigglers to the bedding. (There are approximately 500 worms per pound.)

Add a handful of soil or ground eggshells – this “grit” helps the worms digest food.

Bury food scraps (excluding meat) in the bedding, in small amounts at first. As the worm population increases, feed them more frequently.

Keep your worm bin in a well-ventilated area and out of direct sunlight. Laundry rooms and garages make great locations. Stack it on bricks or blocks to allow for drainage – you can also use the lid of the unused bin. If the bin is outside, keep an eye on moisture levels during the summer; in winter, move the bin inside or place it in a sheltered location to protect the worms from getting too cold.

When it's time to harvest your compost – in two to three months – fill the second bin with bedding and kitchen scraps, and place it inside the first bin. Attracted by the food, the worms will crawl up into the second bin through the holes in the bottom. The second box becomes the active bin, while the first is full of rich, ready-to-use compost.