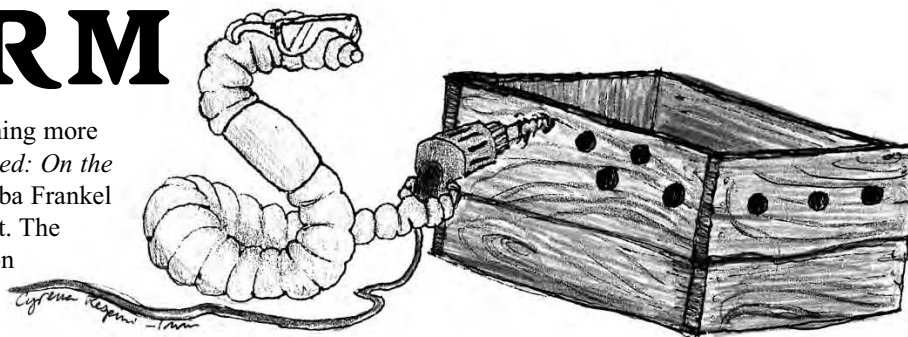


WAY OF THE WORM

If you're looking to unearth the secrets to a healthy, flourishing garden, consider learning more about earthworms. At 1 pm Saturday, May 1, Amy Stewart, author of *The Earth Moved: On the Remarkable Achievements of Earthworms*, and *Worm Digest* Managing Editor S. Zorba Frankel will be co-presenters of worm education at Down to Earth Farm & Gardens, 532 Olive St. The event is being done in conjunction with the UO Bookstore. Here is just a little information and review to get you geared up for an interesting look at the garden ...



Worm Composting Turns Garbage into Gold By S. Zorba Frankel

Earth Day is the perfect opportunity to begin a new, earth-friendly and fun activity. Worm composting is easy, keeps food waste out of our landfill, and produces an excellent natural plant fertilizer. It can be done in a small container in a house or apartment, in the garage, or outside. With a little care and maintenance, the worm bin will smell only of damp earth.

So, what is a worm bin? Just a shallow container, usually wood and plastic. Small air holes drilled (1/8" is fine) low and high on the bin insure that air reaches all the material inside. Additional holes on the bottom help prevent waterlogging. Bin size depends on how much food waste you produce. Save your food waste for a week, then measure its weight in pounds; you'll want your bin to have that same number of square feet of surface area. One very popular bin size is 2' x 3' by 20" high, made from one sheet of exterior grade plywood (see our plans at www.wormdigest.org/buildyourbin.html). This bin can accept six pounds of food waste weekly, and many families of three or four people find

this size adequate for their needs. You can also build your custom worm condo using scrap (untreated) wood.

You can keep a smaller worm bin under the sink, where it's easy to access while preparing food. A plastic storage tote works well, (and you'll want to have a catch tray underneath to receive any excess liquid.) Be generous in drilling air holes in your plastic bin, as they tend to stay wetter inside. (Designs for this bin are also at our website.)

Redworms' needs are simple. They will do fine at temperatures between 35-85°F, and do their best work at 60-80°. They require a very moist and dark environment. You may already have seen redworms in an outdoor compost pile, under decomposing leaves, or where you've heavily mulched your soil with organic matter. Don't confuse redworms with soil-dwellers. In nature, redworms live above the ground, where they clean up stuff that lands on the surface.

Getting Started

First, fill your bin with a high-carbon bed-

ding material like brown leaves, shredded newspaper or cardboard (even office paper), chopped straw or hay. Dampen it well — when you squeeze it, a few drops should come out — that's roughly a 75 percent moisture content. Then add your worms, which you can get from a worm farm (a web search will turn up many hundreds of companies) or see our current list of Oregon and Washington worm sellers at www.wormdigest.org/localworms.html. Be sure you're getting redworms, the species called *Eisenia fetida*. Starting a smaller bin with one pound (1000-1200 redworms) and a larger bin with two pounds is about right. They'll multiply if the feeding rate and space allows.

Feed your worms slowly at first, and increase the rate after a few weeks. It's best to chop food waste small with a knife. Don't feed meat, dairy or very fatty foods, and go easy on the citrus peels. Bury all food 4 to 6 inches down in the bedding to reduce fruit fly problems.

There are a few common problems that many worm composting bins have, but you

can learn to anticipate these and avoid them. Don't let the bin get too wet, which can cut off air circulation. As bedding is eaten you'll want to add more, to keep carbon and nitrogen in balance. In general, keep the bin out of the sun (cooked worms are a really sad situation). Don't worry about seeing all kinds of tiny busy organisms in the bin, however. It's a complete decomposer ecosystem in there (see www.wormdigest.org/crittergallery.html).

You can harvest your black gold after three or four months. One simple way to harvest is to scoop out all the finished material in the bottom 4 to 6 inches of the bin. Use it as you would any fertilizer.

By the way, kids love worms. Your worm bin can be the source of a great number of lessons in biology, general science and some pretty exciting mathematics ("If two of our worms produce 15 cocoons a week, and hatch in XX weeks, with 2 to 5 baby worms per cocoon, how many worms will we have in YY weeks?").

S. Zorba Frankel is managing editor of Worm Digest, headquartered here in Eugene. For more information, visit www.wormdigest.org



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