

Vermicomposting

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When the days become shorter and there is a chill in the air, we know the growing season is ending and the yard work is slowing down.



There is not as much to do in the fall and winter as there is during the other seasons. It is a good time to add to the compost pile, to turn it and tend to it. However, even that chore is less of a burden. If you are a dedicated composter, there is an alternative you can do in the winter - vermicomposting.

Vermicomposting is also known as worm composting. It is a great way to use up your clean kitchen waste and food scraps. All year long, the worms are hard at work turning waste into high quality compost. Added benefits include less trash to put on the curb and nothing in the garbage disposal. While there are many kinds of worms in the soil, the best kinds for vermicomposting are the red wigglers, *Eisenia fetida*. They are often chosen for worm composting, because it is easy to replicate their preferred environment in a worm bin. They are also ideal, because they have short life spans, reproduce quickly and tolerate a wide range of environmental conditions.

It is very simple to start worm composting. A simple container about fifteen inches deep and a tight-fitting lid is all you need to get started. Make sure there are ventilation holes in the sides or lid to help with air circulation. The worms need bedding, so a four to six layer of shredded newspaper is a good choice. It does need to be moist, with the consistency of a wrung-out sponge, and then fluffed to create air pockets. Place the bin where the temperatures are in the forty to eighty degree range. Avoid direct sunlight as the bin will dry out fast. Under the kitchen sink is the ideal place for the compost bin; it is usually the closest to the work space.

The worms are basically vegetarians so feed them fruits and vegetables. Avoid dairy and meat products as they will spoil and create a nuisance. Add food scraps to the new worm bin gradually at first, introducing about a half-pound of food scraps per pound of worms in the bin until they become accustomed to their new home. Burying the food under the bedding helps reduce fruit fly and odor problems. Rotating the spots where food scraps are buried will help the worms distribute throughout the bin.

You will know when it is time to start harvesting; the contents are brown and earthy looking. Plus you won't be able to identify the original bedding material. This process can take about two months. The compost will resemble fresh potting soil. You can then use it to amend your indoor houseplants, or to top dress your gardens when spring arrives again.

For more information on vermicomposting, [please contact the Penn State Master Gardeners in your county.](#)

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