

Questions from Sustainability Speakers Series:

Feeding your Garden: Vermicomposting March 24th, Rhonda Sherman

One of our guests asked “will we all get the email answers? Yes! Here they are.

- I missed the first one and would love to buy a recording of that
- Could we get the link to the recording of Rhonda's recent backyard composting presentation
 - You can find all past recordings and references on this website:
<https://extension.wsu.edu/snohomish/naturalresources/sustainable-community-stewards/sustainability-speakers-series/>
- Is newspaper an acceptable material?
 - Shredded newspaper makes excellent bedding for worms, as does shredded or torn cardboard, dried leaves, compost, or coconut coir. What you are looking for is a higher carbon product that will provide lots of airspace and hold some moisture. You will want to steer clear of glossy advertisement type newspaper.
- Do you have to defrost before putting in worm bin?
 - In general, thaw before adding to bin. By the way, freezing (and then thawing) food waste has the benefit of breaking down the food faster.
- Are onion peels/papery outer part, ok in worm bin?
 - Yes. Remember, your worms are vegans. You can feed most vegetative food waste, even things like onions (and onion peels), or citrus peels in small quantities. What you will find is that your worms will simply not like some foods. If a food sits in your bin unconsumed, it should be removed to your backyard compost bin.
- I have a wood worm bin several years old, and have a HUGE population of pill/sow bugs. They seem to be eating the wood, but are they good, bad or indifferent to the worms and the vermicomposting process?
 - Your sow bugs are indifferent to the worms. Most additional macrobes in your worm bin are not detrimental, but some can indicate a less-than-optimal environment for the worms. A good example of this are pot worms. Pot worms are small, almost translucent white worm that are less than 1” in length. (You might think they are baby red wiggler, which are more brownish-red in color). They proliferate in bins that are overly acidic. Again, they are not harmful to the worms, but they are indicative of a pH that is not optimal for your worms. Remember, your bin is likely to be home to millions of microbes and to several types of macrobes. They are all a part of the decay process.
- When my veggie garden is already planted and I harvest worm compost, does it need to be worked into the soil? Or is “mulching” on top going to benefit the plants?
 - Given all options, it is optimal to mix in (side-dress), providing structure to the soil, while also offering nutrients and beneficial organisms. Mulching, when mixing in would damage roots, is also beneficial.
- Is it ok to put castings on house plants?
 - Yes it certainly is. Add a half-inch to one inch layer around base of plant. Gently work into soil if this can be done without disturbing roots. Otherwise, simply water in.

- If I harvest compost, and have no immediate use for it and store it for spring use, and it dries out, will it still be good? Or would it be best to spread immediately?
 - For storing your castings, you want to ensure they have air and moisture. This keeps all of the wonderful microbes alive and happy. To do this, get a large container - a 5 gallon bucket is a good choice. Drill a few holes around the top of the bucket (here is your air flow). Fill loosely with your castings. Cover the top with a section of newspaper, that you have dampened (here is your moisture). Put the lid on and store above freezing. Check it every few months to ensure the castings are still damp. Sprinkle water to re-dampen the newspaper if the castings start to dry out.
- What about slugs showing up in an outdoor worm bin? Is that a sign something's wrong?
 - Worms and slug seem to love the same environment. Damp, dark, with good food. Not a worry.
- Why are plastics not detrimental to the worms like they are to humans?
 - Avoid putting plastics (including those nice little sticky labels on our fruits and vegetables) in your worm bin. Plastics will not break down and will simply sit in your bin until you remove them.
 - For the bins themselves, some prefer to use wood bins over plastic bins. In general wood bins seem to insulate better in the winter and stay cooler in the summer. The disadvantage is that wood bins will break down over time. I have two above ground plywood bins and two in-ground cedar bins that are all functioning well after five years of use. Here is a link for building the plywood bins. They work great. [Microsoft Word - Final Seattle Tilth Worm Composting Bin.docx \(tilthalliance.org\)](#)
- I have a piece of thin carpeting in top of my bin- are they getting enough air? My cardboard got so slimy, decided to try the carpet layer.
 - You will be able to gauge if your worms are getting enough air by watching what the bin is doing. If your bin seems really wet, or is smelling of anything other than a pleasant earthy smell, you should remove the carpet for awhile. Do the same if your worms seem to be trying to climb out of your bin. A burlap bag works well to cover your bin as well. (These can often be had for the asking at a local coffee roasting company.)
- Do you have data on pathogen reduction in vermicomposting?
 - Vermiculture should not considered a method for pathogen reduction. There are mixed studies, but if pathogen reduction is one of your aims, you should choose a hot composting system, achieving temps above 130 degrees F. for a period of time. A hot compost is not compatible with vermiculture.
- How often do the worms need to be fed. If one takes a one-month vacation, do I need to hire a worm sitter? :-)
 - Worms are very tolerant of neglect (the exception being too wet or too dry). They can be left without food for a month and do just fine.
- Will worms eventually consume pits of peach, avocado, cherry, etc? Or should those go elsewhere?
 - Worms will not consume these items. They can be put into your worm bin, but they are likely to be there several months later. When you harvest your castings, just toss the pits in with the castings. They can easily be tossed into the garden. Maybe you will get a lucky avocado tree. 😊

- Clarification on casting, did u say to put new bedding next to castings on the top then move the whole thing back to the bin, or pick up each worm to the new bedding in the bin? Thank u for wonderful topic.
 - When harvesting castings there are two methods.
 - Method One: Pile the entire contents of the worm bin onto a large tarp. Wait 10 minutes. The worms will dive towards the center, away from the light. Remove the outer layer. Wait another 10 minutes and harvest the outer layer again. Repeat this process over the course of a sunny afternoon until you are left with a small pile of mostly worms and a wonderful bucket or two of castings. Now add these worms back to your bin (to which you have added fresh bedding).
 - Method Two: Mentally divide your worm bin into two parts. Feed one side until it is filled up to the brim. This will take a few months. Once this “side” is full, move over to the second side and begin filling with bedding and food waste. As the worms consume all of the food on the first side, they will migrate to the second side. By the time the second side is filled, most of your worms will have migrated to the new side and you can scoop up the castings on the first side.
- concentration(s) do you suggest for applying casting in the garden?
 - Anything up to a 25-30% concentration is good. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that you will get to that high ratio in an open garden as this would require a tremendous amount of castings.
 - The more likely scenario is:
 - top-dressing with an inch thick layer, spread about 3 inches wide, around the base of an established plant and watered in well.
 - side-dressing with the same amount as above, gently mixed is so as not to disturb roots.
 - before new planting, cover soil with 2-3 inches of castings and fold in as normal.
- where can I get red wigglers in Sno or Island county
 - Contact one of us. We can ask our volunteers if anyone has worms to share. Keep in mind that you may get more than Eisenia Fetida. You may also get mites, pot worms, and even a sow bug or two.
 - Island County sarah.bergquist@wsu.edu
 - Snohomish County heather.teegarden@wsu.edu
 - Although we cannot recommend one commercial vender over another you will find several online. Here is Washington State vendor.
 - Yelm Worm Farm [The Organic Network \(yelmworms.com\)](http://TheOrganicNetwork(yelmworms.com))

If you have any additional questions about vermiculture, please contact us. We love to help with worms.