

Green Mountain Soil Worm Care and Feeding Guide

Worms can survive a wide range of environmental conditions, but in order for your population to thrive you will need to set up and maintain your bin(s) properly and feed your worms regularly. This guide will cover worm bin selection and set-up, suitable feed stocks, and methods to harvest your worms and castings.

Setting up your worm bin:

Worm bins come in all shapes and sizes, from fancy stackable bins to simple plywood boxes. Wooden bins breathe, which allows them to absorb excess moisture and promote decent airflow, but if you need a self-contained unit a Rubbermaid-type tub will work fine. No matter which type of bin you decide to use, airflow and size are the most important considerations. You want a bin that allows decent airflow throughout the bin and is big enough to accommodate the food scraps and other organic matter that you produce on a daily basis. A good-sized bin for a family of four that produces a pound of food scraps a day is about six square feet.

Just as important as the size of the bin is the bedding material that you use. Worms breathe through their skin, and in order for oxygen to pass through their skin it must be kept moist. Therefore, any bedding that you choose must be able to retain moisture. You want the bedding moist, but not soggy (like a wrung-out sponge). Good bedding materials include aged horse manure, followed by shredded cardboard, newspaper and office paper, leaves, compost, and peat moss. If you use peat moss, however, you should leach it first to reduce its acidity before adding worms to it.

Finally, make sure your bin is located in a cool, dark location. Cellars work best because they stay cool in the summer and warm in the winter. Keep your bin out of direct sunlight. Worms can tolerate a wide range of temperatures but the 70-80 degree range is ideal. Cover your bin with a burlap bag, tarp, or black plastic garbage bag to keep the light out.

Adding worms to your bin:

Once you have set up your bin with the proper bedding you are ready to receive your worms. When the worms arrive simply open the bag and dump the contents on top of your bin. Worms are very sensitive to light so within a minute or two most of the worms will have burrowed down into your bin. You can help them out by gently separating them with your fingers and spreading them out on the top of your bin.

Feeding your worms:

Compost worms will eat virtually any type of organic matter, from coffee grounds and watermelon rinds to rotisserie chickens and coconuts. Some people advise against adding meat and dairy products to worm bins, but as long as you are not overloading your bin with food this should not be a problem. Be sure to mark the spot where you buried meat, however, and do not touch this spot for a month or two or you will be greeted with a very offensive odor.

Although worms can eat their weight in garbage every day, a more conservative estimate is half their weight daily. So, if you and your family are producing seven pounds of food scraps each

week (one pound a day) you will need two pounds of worms to start with. If you are patient, however, you can start with one pound and compost your overage in an outdoor pile until your population catches up with you.

Harvesting the castings:

In about two months your worms will have eaten all the organic matter in your bin and turned it into rich, crumbly soil that you can apply to your lawn and garden. The best way to tell if your compost is finished is to use your nose—if it smells like a forest after a rainfall it's done.

The trick, at this point, is separating your compost from your worms. There are many ways to do this but the best way is to let the worms do the work for you. Place a few large watermelon rinds face down on the top of your bin. Cover the bin and leave it alone for a few days. Come back and turn over the rinds and scoop up the worms and transfer them to a holding bin. Repeat these steps until very few worms come to the top. Then dump the castings, refill your bin with bedding and transfer the worms back to the bin.

Other methods include divide and dump, whereby you remove half your bin (worms and all) and dump it on your garden and fill the empty spot in your bin with new bedding. Your population will rebound in a month or two but if your goal is to grow more worms this is not the best option. A variation on this is to push all the compost to one side of the bin and fill the empty spot with food and cover. In a few weeks all the worms will have moved over to the side with the food and you can remove the compost from the other side and dump it on your garden.

Another popular method involves using the worm's aversion to light to your advantage. Dump the contents of your bin on a tarp on your floor or work table and make a number of cone-shaped piles on the tarp. Shine a bright light on the piles and move from one to the next, gently scraping off the top and sides and dumping the compost in buckets. As you work the piles the worms will crawl away from the light and after a few passes you will be left with small piles of worms that you can pick up and transfer to new bedding.