



## Starting a Vermiculture Program

By Danielle Baker

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I have been worm composting (vermi-composting) for over twelve years now and it brings me great joy. My goal is that this article will inspire you to try it, create an understanding that it is not difficult to do, but that it requires patience and in some cases courage. I have fun using worm castings (castings are worm poop) as the only fertilizer for my garden. You can create a valuable product out of garbage that would have gone to the landfill or been burned. In time, you will also have extra worms to share with your family and friends.

The rule of thumb for a worm bin is two square feet for each person in your household, and the bin should be ten to sixteen inches deep. You can buy a bin, build one out of wood, or use an old dresser drawer, shipping crate or barrel. I have used 18-gallon plastic storage containers for many years. Place your bin in a place where it will not freeze or overheat. Worms enjoy temperatures between 40-80 degrees Fahrenheit. Start your bin with a pound of worms.

Some common problems with worm bins are overfeeding and getting too wet. Typically worms can eat one-half their weight in food per day or one pound of food per square foot. This can vary depending on the time of year. Every one to three months add fresh bedding (shredded paper, moist sawdust, leaves, or straw). Keep the bedding moist as a wrung-out sponge. Wooden bins may require more water. I use plastic bins, but found they often they got too wet. If your bin is too wet, simply add four to six inches of bedding and stop feeding for two to three weeks. It is very important to bury all food waste so you do not attract flies. Underground composting or any other composting method can be done to account for the overflow of organic matter in your household so worms are not overfed. Do not feed worms meat, dairy, or pet droppings.

Worm compost can take a few months to develop before you are able to harvest; it is ready when it is dark, crumbly and sweet-smelling. It is best used with a twenty percent blend of potting soil. Sprinkle a one quarter to one inch layer around indoor and outdoor plants, and the plants will

love it. Another benefit, especially since we are in a drought, is that compost increases the water holding capacity of soil. Used with mulch, a gardener can drastically reduce watering needs in their landscape.

When compost is passed through a worm's gut, it picks up the beneficial bacteria increasing nitrogen availability, balancing pH and much more. Worms can be used as an educational tool to teach kids and adults about the importance of recycling, gardening and science. There is a tremendous amount of information out there for anyone who wants to start a compost or worm bin. More University of California (UC) researched-based information is available on the web, or by calling our UC Master Gardeners during office hours (see below).

Learn how worms can help your garden this Saturday, February 22nd at the free Master Gardener class: "Worms and Worm Bins." The three hour class begins at 9:00 a.m. in the Government Center Hearing Room, Building C, 2850 Fairlane Court in Placerville. Master Gardeners will teach how worms can rapidly break down kitchen waste to make worm compost, one of the best organic fertilizers possible. The types of worms needed, how to harvest the compost and how to set up a worm bin will also be covered.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at [http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC\\_Master\\_Gardeners/](http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/). Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.