



UCCE San Mateo & San Francisco Counties

Master Gardener Program

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VERMICOMPOSTING Qs & As

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Q1: Why are my worms always trying to escape the bin?

A: It is not unusual to find worms on the sides of the bin and the underside of the lid, and it doesn't always mean they are trying to escape. Before it rains, you may notice more moving up the sides which is likely a natural survival response to get to higher ground so they don't risk drowning. Sometimes this behavior can indicate an emerging problem with the bedding (too hot, dry or wet) or food (undesirable types or amounts) and you can adjust accordingly. Worms outside the bin or on the ground around the bin is a definite sign of problems. If that happens, troubleshoot and take action quickly to improve conditions in the bin.

Q2: Can I feed worms coffee grounds, and if so, how much?

The average amount of coffee grounds a household produces per day is acceptable in a mature active bin. Remember you can add the paper filter, too. Since coffee grounds are somewhat acidic, watch for any signs of problems and correct them. A good rule of thumb for any food you add to the bin is to never add more than 10-15% of the tray volume at once. If there is too much food or a less desirable type of food, you will notice that the item might spoil, mold or really get funky, so remove it and next time try less or avoid it altogether.

Q3: How do you control pests including fruit flies and roly polys in the worm bin?

A worm bin is an ecosystem in itself with many critters besides worms, including many microscopic ones. They all work together to break down the food and bedding to create vermicompost, so you actually want to see other critters in the bin. Your main concern is an imbalance of one type of organism, which usually indicates a problem. For example, too many mites usually means the bin is too wet, which you can mitigate by adding dry bedding. You can also trap mites by adding a slice of white bread and removing it when it's covered with mites.

Flies in general and roly polys do aid in the composting process but can be annoying or cause damage in the garden. Fruit fly outbreaks are often caused by adding food scraps containing their eggs, so cover fruit and avoid leaving it on counters where flies can lay eggs. Fruit flies can be controlled by completely burying food scraps in the bedding. DIY apple cider vinegar traps placed near the bin can also be helpful.

Roly polys can be controlled by picking them out of the compost before applying to the garden. Generally, you will not get these in your bin unless you use materials like leaves from your garden.

Q4: How do in-ground worm composting systems work?

In ground-systems are built on or placed into the soil and allow worms to migrate in and out. One example of an in-ground system, commonly called a worm tower, consists of a 6-8 inch diameter tube with ½ inch holes drilled in the sides. It is placed in a hole 12-18 inches deep with several inches extending above the soil surface (total length of tube is at least 16-22"). You may cover the top of the tube with an overturned painted clay pot which would protect it and add some art to your garden.

You can also use a 5-gallon plastic bucket so you have more space to monitor and add ingredients – remember to drill holes in the bottom and on the sides. The larger container will generate more finished compost.

To use your in-ground system, add bedding, water, food scraps and worms (in healthy soil worms are already present, but you can still add more red wigglers). Cover with more bedding to help avoid attracting pests, then wait for the worms to do their work. Continue to add food and bedding and when enough vermicompost has built up, spread it around your garden and repeat!