

Boulder Worms Aug 2, 2009

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You can also find most of the content in this newsletter on my blog:  
<http://boulderwormcomposting.com>

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- \* Hot composting in my worm bin
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----- HOT COMPOSTING IN MY WORM BIN

I was recently poking around my worm bin, and noticed something a bit disturbing. It's the dog days of summer and my patio, though shaded, is getting warm. In addition, because I have a farm share, I have been adding a lot of vegetable matter to my worm bin. Furthermore, I haven't done much maintenance on this bin, ever. Other than pulling out some castings from the bin, periodically adding leaves when the contents go down, and checking every so often to make sure that my worms are still alive, I haven't done anything. I've had this worm bin for a number of years, and I've never done a full harvesting--I've never done a full separation of the contents of this bin.

The heat was coming from the center of the bin, which ruled out sun exposure (which doesn't happen for that long anyway). I dug into the center with my post hole digger, and the sides were hot to the touch. Basically, the contents of the worm bin were hot composting, which was making the temperature intolerable for the redworms. This is not surprising, because my worm bin is a composting bin ( <http://boulderwormcomposting.com/2008/09/05/my-worm-bin/> ) The material inside the bin was getting hotter and hotter due to bacteriological action, and all my worms were clustering to the sides where it was slightly cooler. They clung to the top of the bin, and some managed to escape outside the bin where they were stuck between a rock and a hard place; the rock being the heat of the bin and a hard place being the light outside. What was I to do?

The best thing to do would have been to take out all the contents of the bin, separate out a significant number of worms, add new bedding, and start over. Basically, push the reset button on my worm system. I would have plenty of castings to distribute and the nitrogen content of the bin would have been decreased to the point that hot composting wouldn't happen again for a while. However, I didn't have time or space to do a full harvest.

Instead, I did a number of small things that I thought might help.

- \* added more bedding. I added this in hopes that the worms would have another place to go, and to increase the carbon content of the bin
- \* dug holes in the worm bin material. This allowed air to go in and out. I'm not sure this helped, because it could increase the airflow to the center of the pile, thus increasing hot composting. But I thought it might also decrease the temperature of the entire pile to have 2-3 post hole sized holes running through it.
- \* ceased adding food to the worm bin, which should've relieved the nitrogen surplus, or at least provided less food for the hot composters, so they would burn

out sooner.

Then I left town for two weeks.

When I checked back after returning home, I had some happy worms. The composting seem to have ceased, or at least to have burned itself out, and everything is alright.

I think this emphasizes the most important lesson I know about worm keeping: if you have a system that works, and it gets slightly out of whack and the worms have a place to retreat to, it will eventually return to equilibrium. The worms will return. Of course, if it gets too far out of whack, you get dead worms--this happened and the way in my worms froze a couple of winters ago. It's a fine art, this worm keeping.

Please note that I'm not raising worms for maximal production of vermicompost, castings or worms. If I were, this type of event could be catastrophic for my bottom line. Instead, if a few or even half of my worms die, I'm OK because I'm merely using worms for garbage disposal  
( <http://boulderwormcomposting.com/about/> ).

----- EXCERPT FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH A COMMERCIAL VERMICOMPOSTER

I interviewed Jase Roberts, who runs "Wormy Acres of Vermont Red Wiggler Compost Worms" ( <http://vermontworms.com/> ). I found him because of his blog, which had an interesting post about curing worm compost  
( <http://vermontworms.com/2009/06/19/compost-worm-castings-vermicompost/> ) and I thought I'd share a couple of interesting comments he made.

Dan: Why did you make the transition from home worm keeping to commercial vermicomposting?

Jase: I was working as a web developer in Burlington, Vermont (still my primary job), and the cafe right next to our company decided to open a weekly farmers market in the parking lot. I had several years experience with home vermicomposting, and though it would be a fun "buy local" loop to use worms to compost the cafe's food scraps, and then sell the worms and worm castings at the farmers market. It worked out great for the cafe, because I would haul away approximately three 5-gallon pails of food prep scraps per week which they would otherwise haul themselves to the local composting facility.

D: Looks like you primarily sell worms--why not castings?

J: I just this past weekend built myself a rotary worm/casting harvester, which makes the process of separating worms from castings and screening the castings for sale a LOT easier. Your question prompted me to get moving and add worm castings to my website: ( <http://vermontworms.com/buy-worm-castings/> )

I'm not sure exactly how to market and price the castings. Worm castings seem expensive compared to traditional hot compost. They're more expensive because they take a lot more time and effort to produce than hot compost. It's really easy to keep a home worm bin and get a few buckets full of castings per year to use for your garden or houseplants, but producing quantities needed to sell castings commercially takes time and space.

D: Where did you get your worms from initially?

J: I bought 40 lbs from a large grower in California. The worms were packed very poorly, and a lot got out of their boxes in shipment. It was quite an ordeal to go

collect them from the post office: ( <http://vermontworms.com/worms-have-arrived/> )

D: What do you feed your worms?

J: I've mostly fed them food prep scraps from a local cafe, plus our own food scraps. I'm looking to begin adding in some horse or rabbit manure, which is what most commercial producers use.

D: Any other advice for new worm keepers?

J: Start slow and be patient. If anything, underfeed the worms rather than overfeed, and give them plenty of room in their bin (1 1/2 square feet per pound of worms, minimum). Don't get into it thinking you'll start your own business and get rich quick -- there's a lot of difference between keeping a home worm bin (easy) and turning it into a profitable business (hard).

----- THANKS

Thanks for reading! Any comments or suggestions are welcome. Feel free to reply to this email or contact me using this form:  
<http://boulderwormcomposting.com/contact/>

Until next time,

Dan Moore  
<http://boulderwormcomposting.com/>

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