

Boulder worms January 1, 2009

Welcome to the inaugural issue of Boulder worms, a newsletter for vermicomposters around Boulder and the front Range. I'm planning for this to be a monthly newsletter.

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

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WISE WORDS FROM A FAILED VERMICOMPOSTER

I talked with Forest, who had great success with composting restaurant scraps (<http://vermicomposting.wordpress.com/2008/12/02/interview-restaurant-scrap-composting-with-worms/>). At the beginning of spring 2008, he and his girlfriend bought a five gallon bucket of worms and castings and tried to implement a home worm composting system in their kitchen. Sometimes you learn from failures as much as you do from successes. Below is an excerpt of that interview.

... On basic setup ...

Forest: I wanted to see if I could do it inside. So we grabbed some plastic tubs and took one and drilled holes into the bottom of it and slid it into a second one, so the water would drain out into the second one. ... I bought a paper shredder, so I put all my paper through it and I used that in the composter. And this thing held it held 6 months worth of compost in it without getting full.

Dan: How big was it? 14 gallons?

F: Umm, this big [gestures]? It was one of those plastic bins from Target.

D: I think it's probably a 30 gallon one based on the size [of Forest's gesturing]. Like more than 14 gallon because I have a 14 gallon one that's maybe 2.5 feet by 1.5 ft. ... That held about 6 months plus of waste?

F: Plus all of my junk mail.

D: well, did you shred it with the plastic stuff in it?

F: Yup, shredded it all. All of my paper went in there, 6 months worth, and it still wasn't full.

... On unhappy worms ...

F: [The worms] were all in one corner, it would be so wet, [the bedding] was just like clay. I'd add more paper, but the paper didn't really help. Sometimes the bottom tub would fill up with water so much that [the top tub] would just be sitting in water.

... On leachate ...

F: Sometimes [th leachate, water that comes out of the bottom of a worm bin] was fresh, it smelled like it was off, really high bacteria, I didn't feel comfortable putting it on plants, like it was too rich but I live in a 3rd floor apt so I cant just go outside and throw it. ... I would just dump [the leachate] down the toilet if it was bad. Some of them had sat for a long time. Some had sat for a couple weeks and that didn't have the smell anymore. And that I would mix with water and then water my plants with it.

... Final advice ...

D: Do you have any advice for someone thinking of home worm keeping?

F: Don't try it in the kitchen.

D: Don't try it in the kitchen?

F: No, I think that to get proper airflow in it and to get proper drainage, its gonna, there's no way to do it without some smells being involved and opening it up for flies. So I would recommend if you want to keep them frost free, maybe keep them in the garage or something like that. which I just don't have. I'm either in my living space or outside, so I don't really have in between space. It seems appropriate for some sort of in between space. Open garage or something you don't mind a little bit of smells once in a while.

... Dan's commentary ...

I think Forest says some really wise things. I have, of course, not done an exhaustive test of worm composting equipment, but my experience so far has been that if you don't cut the worms a bit of slack regarding flies and smells, you won't have much success. Redworms are a biological system, and such systems are never as neat as human households (non college human households, that is). On the other hand, I think this experiment had issues at the start, since he put an entire 5 gallon bucket in to start with. I saw those buckets, and they were full of castings. I think that it would have been better to have started with just a pound or two of worms. Another possible issue was overloading the worm bin with waste--that often causes smells. I did that myself with citrus peels. In general, I think Forest is ready to try worm bins in the future, but will do so more cautiously.

----- A GREAT WAY TO SEPARATE CASTINGS

Worm castings are a great soil amendment, as evidenced by a soil test I had done on some of my castings:
<http://vermicomposting.wordpress.com/2008/11/12/a-chemical-analysis-of-worm-castings/>

There are numerous ways to separate the worms from the castings. They can be broken down into two broad categories: worm powered or people powered.

With worm powered separation, the worm keeper provides the worms with a reason to move. It can be an attractant, like all the food scraps being placed on one side of the bin, or it can be a deterrent, like bright light or heat. The downside of worm powered separation is that it takes space and time. Worms don't move very fast, so it can be a while. Using food placement can take months. Using bright light or heat can take some time--the worms head down until they don't feel the heat or light, and then you must remove that top layer of castings. Then you repeat the process.

People powered separation, on the other hand, is quick but takes more effort. You can pick worms out of the vermicompost, like I did here:

jan2009.txt

<http://vermicomposting.files.wordpress.com/2008/08/seperatingworms.jpg> . You'll miss some, but you can be done in a short time (the pile in the above picture took me about 45 minutes to go through. Via the_worm_bin yahoo group http://vermicomposting.wordpress.com/2008/10/14/useful-group-the_worm_bin/ , I found another physical method that isn't quite so space consuming. Jennifer posted a great idea about using an old laundry detergent bottle as a 'worm shaker' http://groups.yahoo.com/group/the_worm_bin/message/9619 :

"It's easy, take a larger 96oz bottle either from your recycling bin or a neighbor's, cut the bottle so only the sides and the handle is left; use a sturdy hole punch to punch some holes in the sides to attach the hardware cloth to the sides, & it's just that easy. I have pics in the photo files of what the finished product looks like."

You have to be a member to see her pictures. I encourage you to join the_worm_bin (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/the_worm_bin/), but if you don't want to, the images are here:

<http://vermicomposting.wordpress.com/2008/12/26/301/451a/>

<http://vermicomposting.wordpress.com/2008/12/26/301/attachment/8508/>

It looks like you shake the bottle and the castings fall through. Fertilizer and exercise all in one! I am waiting until I get a detergent bottle finished, but this seems like a great idea.

----- THANKS

Thanks for reading! I am just starting out this newsletter, so any comments or suggestions are welcome. Feel free to reply to this email or contact me using this form: <http://vermicomposting.wordpress.com/about/>

Until next time,

Dan Moore
<http://vermicomposting.wordpress.com/>

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