

Boulder Worms June 1, 2009

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

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----- THE GARDEN OR THE COMPOST PILE?

I recently gave a friend a quart of vermicompost. It's my preferred method of handing out redworms, especially if I'm doing it for free. That way, I don't have to separate worms out. The worms are in a familiar environment, and are at all stages of development--cocoon, immature worms, and mature breeders. In addition, redworms don't break down food all by themselves. They are a part of a complex ecosystem of micro-organisms and insects. Transporting that ecosystem whole makes it easier for the redworms to establish themselves.

My friend asked about putting the redworms in the garden. I had another friend who was interested in doing that as well. Worms in gardens are in general good things, because they aerate the soil, fertilize as they go, and are indicators of pesticide free dirt.

Now, I've never tried to put redworms directly into a garden, but my suspicion is that it would not be optimum. Why? Redworms and other composting worms work well because they accelerate the composting process. They do this by breaking down organic matter in an efficient, effective manner, which in turn requires continual feeding. If redworms don't get enough new organic matter, they will die. The ecosystem in which they live remains in balance--if there's not enough food to support them, a smaller population results. If there is a sudden influx of food, then they will reproduce as they can, and eventually eat all of it (another species, like ants, could move in and displace them if the environment is hospitable, though). The time scale is not weeks, but months.

So, given that redworms need regular infusions of decaying organic matter to maintain their populations, how do they fit into the garden? I don't believe they do, except as they

* arrive there in vermicompost, in cocoons or as adults

or

* travel to the garden of their own free 'will'

In the first case, redworms will sometimes be placed in my garden because I'm too lazy to pick every last cocoon and worm out of compost I'm about to place on my plants. I assume these worms die relatively quickly, adding their nitrogen to the soil for my garden plants. In the second, if you place a

worm bin next to a garden bed, and the worms choose to travel in and around the bed, they will bring some benefits. They will aerate the soil and provide paths for water to travel deeper in the ground, as well as distribute castings. (See this worm tower video (<http://bouldervermicomposting.com/2008/12/11/worm-tower-video/>) for some ideas on how to make it easy for worms to live in and amongst a garden.) But they will do this themselves, because the environment suits them, not because they are sprinkled on a garden bed.

To sum up, I believe the appropriate place for dumping redworms is on your compost pile. If your worms are happy and find food sources in your garden, they will migrate there, but I don't think that's the right place to add them at the start.

----- WORMKEEPING BOOKS

Here's a list of books that I have read or want to read regarding wormkeeping.

Worms eat my garbage, Mary Appelhof

The best way to start wormkeeping, with plenty of theory and practical advice. Short and sweet. Every wormkeeper should have a copy.

Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations, David Montgomery

A sober look at how soil is the foundation of civilizations. It was nice to read about earthworms' role in creating this precious building block. The emphasis of this book was much more on soil and history than on wormkeeping.

Raising earthworms for profit, Earl Shields

I read the 1982 edition (there's a 1994 edition as well) and found this to be firmly aimed at the business worm keeper. He discusses some aspects that matter to the home wormkeeper, such as climate and feedstock, as well as some that don't, like marketing and advertising.

The Earth Moved, Amy Stewart

I have not read this, except for the excerpt (<http://www.amystewart.com/temexcerpt.html>). I have heard good things about it, and have put it on my list.

Earthworm Ecology, Clive Edwards

Clive Edwards, at Ohio State, has written much academically about earthworms and their role in ecologies. This academic textbook looks like a slow read (and it is pricey), but also appears to be chock full of information.

I would love to hear of other books where composting earthworms play a large or small part. Please feel free to contact me at <http://bouldervermicomposting.com/contact/> if you have any suggestions.

----- NEWSLETTER ARCHIVES

I have put all issues of the Boulder Worms newsletter online; if you want to read the back issues, please check them out at (<http://bouldervermicomposting.com/newsletter/>).

----- THANKS

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

Until next time,

Dan Moore
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