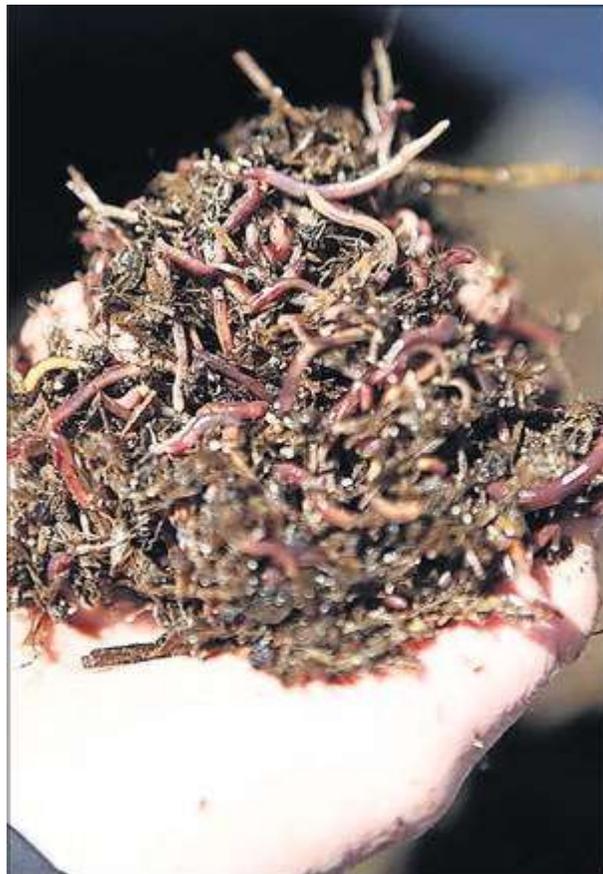


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ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS

Put worms to work for all compost needs and May in the garden



Worms not only are great for soil, but they make fantastic compost. GARY QUACKENBUSH / NORTH BAY BUSINESS JOURNAL

Take food, add to a bin and allow critters to do their part to help your garden

Question: I live in a condo with a patio and small yard. I do a lot of container gardening. I don't have room for a compost bin, but would like to put my food scraps to work for me in my garden. Can you tell me a bit about worm bins — how to start a bin, maintain the worms and how to use worm castings in my garden?

Answer: Worm bins are a fantastic alternative to a compost pile when we just don't have the extra space in our garden. They provide a concentrated product that is packed full of nutrients.

We call this rich, finished compost "castings". We need far less of this wonderful material to spread on our plants than we do of traditional compost.

Getting started is easy. Since worms don't like the light, you need a bin that has a lid and is not transparent, or clear. The bin should be at least 11/2 feet by 1-foot, but you can always go bigger.

Next, you will need some kind of bedding for the worms to live in. You can use shredded newspaper, shredded cardboard, shredded office paper, leaf litter, or coconut coir. It should be something that is made of matter found in nature that can double as a food source for the worms. All the bedding, except for the very top layer, needs to be slightly damp. Everything in the bin, except that top layer should be as damp as a wrung out sponge.

Next add the worms. Red wiggler worms, *Eisenia fetida*, are your best bet. They can eat half their weight in food scraps each day and love to live in the top layer of soil.

Worms are generally sold by the pound; one pound is enough to get started as they reproduce quickly.

Once your worms are settled into their new home you can begin feeding them your food scraps. In general, worms are vegan. They love to eat fruits and vegetables, except for citrus and avocado. They do not like citrus of any kind. Worms breathe through their skin so they do not like oils, which can interfere with their breathing.

Limit feedings of avocado as it is high in oils, although the pit and rind are okay. Be careful to avoid giving them very hot peppers or too much garlic or onion. Worms do not like meats and dairy, but eggshells can be broken down into tiny pieces to provide the worms with some grit in their diet. A sprinkle of sand or native soil can do the same. Worms can also eat manures from animals that do not eat meat, such as horses, cows, chickens and rabbits.

After a couple of weeks you will start to see a rich, dark material appear in the bin, the worm castings. After a month or so you can begin harvesting the material and using it on your plants. Simply scoop out the material, being careful to look for worms and their cocoons, which are round, reddish and visible to the naked eye. Return any worms or cocoons to the bin.

You can also use worm castings to make compost tea, a solution that is full of good nutrients for your plants, but not for human consumption. Place 1/2-cup of castings in a permeable material container, such as burlap or a nylon stocking. Put that in a 5-

gallon bucket of water. Use an aquarium filter to aerate the water for at least 24 hours.

You can use ¼-cup of castings in a container that is 10 inches in diameter. If the plants are heavy bloomers or an edible plant, you might need more. Castings are safe for use on seedlings or ailing plants; they do not burn your plant or its roots. The best time to apply castings is right before a rain or a watering.

Keeping worms at home is easy and fun; your garden will thank you.

Additional Resources:

Putting Worms to Work and Keeping Them Happy: <https://tinyurl.com/4zewvvu2>

About Worm Castings (worm poop): <https://tinyurl.com/yc4ff3f2>

May in the garden: what's happening?

Ready? Set? Plant veggies! It's time to plant all summer veggies beans, cucumbers, eggplant, kale, lettuce, melons, peppers, squash, and tomatoes. Keep in mind that we are still in a drought. Consider your "water budget" and use water-conserving methods such as watering in the early morning or evening, using slow irrigation methods such as drip or soaker hoses. Select vegetable varieties that are more drought resistant. See the useful links below for suggestions.

- Many commonly used herbs are naturally drought-tolerant due to their origin in the Mediterranean Basin. Still others withstand surprisingly little water during the dry season. Consider planting borage, chives, lemon verbena, oregano, sweet marjoram, rosemary, sage, thyme, and winter savory.
- Eliminate weeds. They compete for water and harbor pests that take advantage of water-stressed crops. Be aggressive in removing them from growing areas.
- Add edible flowers to your garden for a pop of color and also to attract beneficial insects that pollinate the garden and provide an ecological balance against harmful pests. Common edible flowers include carnations, violas, lilacs, roses, lavender, marigolds and nasturtiums. You can also enjoy the flowers of herbs such as rosemary, basil, thyme, chives, and sage.
- Deadhead and prune azaleas, rhododendrons and camellias after they have finished blooming. To remove the spent flowers of the rhododendrons, use two fingers to pinch or pruners to cut just above the two new leaflets. During the spring and summer, feed these shrubs monthly with a balanced organic fertilizer formulated for acid-loving plants.
- Prune all spring-flowering trees and shrubs when they finish blooming.

Useful links:

Food gardening in a drought: <https://bit.ly/3E4rYU4>

Low-water kitchen herbs: <https://bit.ly/3v7EiPi>

Contributors to this week's column were Karen Felker, Jennifer Roberts, and Debbie Westrick. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.