



Smart Gardening Information Sheet

WORM COMPOSTING QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

EDIBLE, adj. Good to eat, and wholesome to digest, as a worm to a toad, a toad to a snake, a snake to a pig, a pig to a man, and a man to a worm.

*Ambrose Bierce, 1911
 The Devil's Dictionary*



PROBLEM	CAUSE	SOLUTION
Odors	Bedding is too wet	Add some fresh, dry bedding to absorb the excess water. Leave the lid off the bin for a day or two, until bedding returns to a normal moisture level.
	Too much food	The worm bin is probably overloaded with food. Stop placing food in the bin and allow the worms to catch up. You can also add more worms if you plan on continuing to feed the worm bin at the same rate. It's also possible that the bedding has become too wet (see above).
	The pH has become too acidic	Usually, the pH in the worm bin doesn't need any modifications, as red worms can withstand a fairly wide range of pH levels (normally, 6.0 – 8.0). If the bin smells like vinegar, then check the pH in the worm bin using a pH test strip (available at most hardware stores in the pool supplies area or at most pet stores in aquarium supplies area). If the bin is too acidic (pH lower than 6.0), then add some crushed dried egg shells or granulated limestone to neutralize the acid (never use harsh pool chemicals as this can kill the worms).
	Material is too compact	Loosen the worm compost by mixing in some moist shredded newspaper, coconut coir, etc.
Water is leaking from the bin	Worm tea tray is too full or there is excess worm tea in the bottom of the worm bin	If the bin doesn't have a worm tea tank, then place the bin on its side, at about a 45° angle, to drain the excess water. Add some fresh, dry bedding and leave the lid off the bin for a day or two. If you can, collect the excess water and use it as a liquid fertilizer on your house plants, flower beds and garden. If the worm bin has a worm tea tray, place a container under the spigot and drain the excess worm tea into the container and use as a natural liquid organic fertilizer on your houseplants or in your yard or garden.
	Spigot is leaking	Place a container under the spigot of the worm bin and drain all of the worm tea from the worm tea tray. Remove the plastic nut from the spigot inside the worm tea tray. Remove the outer rubber O-ring seal. Replace the rubber O-ring seal (you can obtain a new one from a hardware store – use a 7/8" inside diameter x 1-1/8" outside diameter rubber or plastic O-ring.)

PROBLEM	CAUSE	SOLUTION
<p>The worm bedding is dry</p>	<p>Using foods that are too dry</p>	<p>The worm bin should require very little, if any, additional water beyond what is normally contained in the worm's food. If the bedding seems too dry (it should feel like a moist sponge), then try feeding some foods naturally high in water, like watermelon or cantaloupe (in small amounts, these foods mold very quickly and can attract fruit flies).</p>
	<p>Evaporation is drying out the bedding</p>	<p>Worm composting bins should be kept in an area where the temperature doesn't get above 90° F or below 50° F, if possible, and never in direct sunlight. During the summer, worm bins may lose considerable moisture to evaporation, so add cool fresh water (if you use tap water, allow it to sit at least 24 hours to remove any residual chlorine) gently to the bin. Too much watering can cause problems with the bin. Water will force air out of the bedding, causing your bin to become smelly (and 'muddy'). The texture of the material in the bin should be moist enough to produce a few drops of water when squeezed. Remember, the bottom of the bin is usually a lot wetter than the top areas. It may be necessary during hot weather to lightly spray to keep the surface moist if it is drying out too much.</p>
<p>Fruit flies</p>	<p>Availability of food</p>	<p>Fruit flies (most of the time, what people call fruit flies are actually vinegar flies, which are related) are normal in a worm bin. Preventing fruit flies is difficult, since the flies are very small and are able to find small holes in the bin easily. One method of treatment is to fill a small jar with vinegar and place in the corner of the bin. The vinegar helps to attract the fruit flies where many will simply fall into the jar and drown. You can also place an adhesive fly trap into the bin. Don't use fly strips with pesticides, since these can harm the worms. Another method is the barrier method. This involves placing a sheet of loosely woven fabric, such as burlap, over the surface of the compost, and then placing all of the worm food under the fabric cover. This helps keep the fruit flies to a minimum, and also helps to keep the compost moist by absorbing excess moisture that would otherwise evaporate from the bin.</p>
<p>Mushrooms in the Bin</p>	<p>Availability of food</p>	<p>Mushrooms are normal in composting bins and don't cause any known problems. If you don't want mushrooms in your bin, simply pick them out and throw them away.</p>
<p>There are small white worms in my worm bin</p>	<p>Enchytraeids</p>	<p>You will often find that there is a large quantity of tiny white worms on the food in your bin. These could be mistaken for baby worms, but they are actually Enchytraeids. They are also called 'Potworms' or 'White Worms'. These worms are distantly related to red worms and will not harm them. Enchytraeids are also very good at helping decompose your food wastes. It's worth noting that Enchytraeids prefer lower pH levels than red worms, and large numbers of them could indicate that the worm bin is slightly acidic. If you find their numbers annoying, place melon skins or bread soaked in milk on the surface of the bin, then lift out when covered in the white worms and dispose of them. Repeating this procedure several times will at least reduce the population.</p>
<p>There are little reddish-brown things in my worm bin</p>	<p>Red mites</p>	<p>Red (or reddish brown) mites find the conditions in a worm composting bin an ideal habitat. They do not harm the live redworms, and are part of the composting cycle. The mites help to break down any tough fibrous materials. Again, if their large numbers annoy you, trap them on melon skins or bread soaked in milk. Lay these on the surface of the bin, and when they are covered in mites, lift them out and dispose of them. Repeat the procedure till numbers are reduced. Exposing the surface of the bin to sunlight is another method to reduce numbers.</p>

PROBLEM	CAUSE	SOLUTION
There are ants in my worm bin	The worm bedding is slightly dry or there is excess food available	Ants are opportunistic creatures and a worm composting bin frequently makes an attractive nesting place, particularly if the bedding has become a bit dry. Adding more moisture to the bin will help (but don't add too much). Prevention is the best solution to ants, so when you set up your worm bin, you should place the legs of the bin into cans filled with water or mineral oil to keep ants from climbing up the legs. If you already have ants in your worm bin, you should try mixing the bedding around the area that has ants. This will disturb the ants and they may move on (repeat this every few days and see if the ants leave). You should note that commercial ant poisons can be harmful to your worms, as well as small children or pets, so if you use these, use them with caution and always follow the manufacturer's usage directions.
My worms are small	Overcrowded worm composting bin	Small worms are usually a signal that the worm bin is becoming overcrowded. The remedy for this is to divide the worm population, placing half into another bin, or giving some away. Also, make sure you are feeding the worms well. A good combination of food waste (nitrogen) and shredded paper or cardboard etc (carbon) will ensure the microbial content is good, and the worms have plenty to eat (worms mostly eat the microbes that are produced during the composting process).
My worms are disappearing	Not enough food	Add more fruits, vegetables and fiber materials (paper, tea bags, etc.) for the worms to eat.
	Bedding is gone	Harvest your worm compost and add shredded newspaper or coconut coir as new bedding (don't use Peat Moss as it is acidic) and mix it with your remaining worm compost.
	Worm bin is getting too hot	Make sure you place your worm composting bin in a cool area out of direct sunlight. Make sure your bin has plenty of moist worm bedding (this helps keep the inside of the bin cooler.) Add small amounts of cool water during the hottest part of the day.
Food scraps take a long time to disappear	Too much food	Limit the amount of food scraps you place into the bin.
	Not enough worms	Add more worms. Generally, and family of 2 – 4 people produce enough scraps to feed a population of at least 1 – 2 pounds of worms. Red worms can eat up to ½ of their weight each day, so 1 pound of worms can eat up to ½ pound of food scraps daily.
Worms are crawling up the sides and top of my worm bin	Various	To a degree, it's perfectly normal for worms to crawl up the sides and the top of the worm composting container (remember, they don't have eyes, and they'll look for food just about everywhere. However, if you notice that large numbers of worms are crawling up the sides of the worm bin, it may mean that the bedding has become too acidic, too wet or the temperature inside the bin is too high. To solve these problems, just refer to the sections above.