Harvesting Vermicompost

Your worms have been busy working all year and now is the time to reap your reward!

After three to six months, there may be little or no original bedding visible in the bin. The contents will be brown and earthy-looking. It is time to remove some of the finished compost! There are a few methods of compost extract you can try:

The No-Mess Method

Push the bin contents over to one side and place new bedding in the space created. Place food scraps in the new bedding. Worms will gradually move to the new scraps, leaving the finished compost to be skimmed off as needed. You may allow worms to feed for a few weeks in the new bedding and then remove most of the compost from the other side of the bin.

The Dump and Sort

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If you want all of your finished compost at once, you must separate the worms manually. Most children love to help!

- Dump the bin contents onto a large plastic sheet or tarp under a bright light or in the sun
- Make several small mounds on the sheet. The worms will hide at the bottom of each mound to escape the light.
- Scrape off the top of the mounds. Remove the worms and the tiny, lemon-shaped cocoons that contain baby worms.
- Mix a little of the finished compost in with new bedding and return the worms and cocoons to the bin.

The Colander Method

This is our least recommended method of harvesting worms! Students should place all contents of the worm bin in a bucket. Gently pour cool water in the bucket. The worms will be okay for a minute or two. Pour the contents of the bucket through a large screen colander. Retrieve the worms and bedding from the colander and return them to the bin. The brown liquid is compost tea that can be used to water plants. Please note that although there are numerous subjective testimonials about the merits of compost tea, there is scant experimental evidence to definitively demonstrate its effectiveness.

The dump and sort in action!

How to Use Vermicompost

Once you have harvested your vermicompost you can use it immediately, or you can store it and use it during the gardening season.

The compost can be directly mixed with your potting soil or garden soil as a soil amendment before planting, which helps make nutrients available to plants. Otherwise, the compost can be used as a top dressing for your indoor garden (as well as your outdoor garden!). You can add 2-3 cups of vermicomposting to your LGT growing containers, or top dress containers with a cup of compost.

Worms do great things!

The USDA Yearbook of Agriculture says that the worms in one acre of land can bring 20 tons of soil to the surface in one year. WOW!

What happens when compost is added to soil?

- The soil's capacity to retain water improves, making it unnecessary to water the garden as frequently.
- The soil's nutrients are replenished, especially the organic nutrients that are derived from nitrogen and carbon.
- Plants that grow in soil rich in nutrients will thrive, yield more abundantly, and be more resistant to disease. They will also protect the soil from erosion from wind and water.

Get curious & experiment!

Experiment with the effects of vermicompost on plants! Grow plants with the use of vermicompost and without. Compare the differences in plant growth and health. You might also set up an experiment to see the effects of your worms on decomposition. Use 3 glass containers. In the first container place a piece of food. In the second container, place your food near the side of your container and cover with soil. In the last container, place your food near the side of your container and add some worms, a little bedding and soil. Cover each jar with a coffee filter to keep out bugs and make sure you cover the glass with opaque paper or cloth. Over the next few weeks, observe the decomposition of your food!

Here are some other uses for your vermicompost:

- Try an experiment using vermicomposting as your soil medium.
- Do a soil test on your vermicomposting to test nutrient levels. You could even send your vermicomposting to your local extension office or lab to have it tested for nutrient levels.
- Give vermicompost as a gift along with seeds for each student as a "Year-End, Little Green Thumbs Passing of the Gift".
- Give extras to friends, classmates, teachers, community members.
- Get in the entrepreneurial spirit and try fundraising with your compost.