

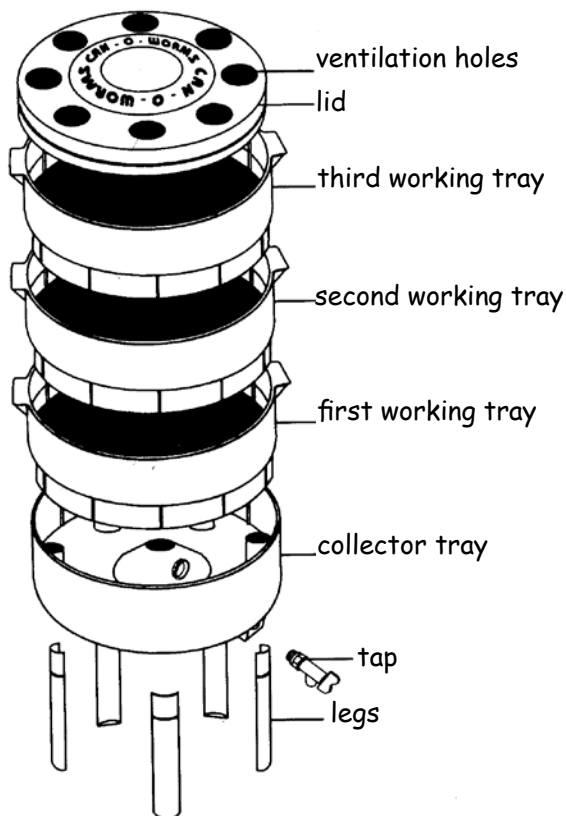
COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ HOME COMPOSTING PROGRAM

GETTING STARTED WITH THE CAN-O-WORMS



What you will need

- Can-O-Worms (includes bedding block).
- Handful of soil or compost to mix with the bedding block.
- Composting worms. Worms increase their population over time so you can start with a handful or a full pound.
- Shredded, non-glossy newspaper to cover up food scraps. This is important for pest control and maintaining a healthy carbon-to-nitrogen ratio for the worms and other critters.
- Two cups of garden soil or compost.
- Two cups cornmeal and 2-3 quarts soft fruit and vegetable scraps for the first feeding.



How the bin works

The Can-O-Worms includes a collector tray (the tray with the tap on it), three identical working trays (the ones with lots of holes in the bottom) and a lid. The collector tray is used to drain off excess moisture from the food scraps. Worms start out with bedding and food in the first working tray and work their way up through the working trays to the top working tray as the trays below fill up. As the worms move up, the food scraps and bedding in the

first working tray decompose into beautiful compost. The compost is used in the garden, the empty working tray is returned to the top of the working tray stack and the cycle continues.

Set up the bin

- Put the legs and the tap into the collector tray. Set the first working tray on top of the collector tray.
- Prepare the bedding tray. Soak the bedding block for 15-45 minutes in about six quarts of water. Use your hands to break the block up into small particles. Put four sheets of non-glossy newspaper in the bottom of the working tray, and spread the bedding mix evenly inside the tray. (The instruction book suggests using the cardboard disk for this purpose, but we find that it traps too much moisture.) Mix two cups of soil or compost with the bedding block to seed it with the microorganisms that aid in the composting process. Excess water will drain out through the holes in the bottom of the working tray.
- Set the other two working trays aside, as you will not need them until the first tray is full in a few weeks.
- Add the worms. Empty the contents of the worm container on top of the bedding in the working tray. No need to mix with bedding.
- Cover the bedding and worms with a two-inch layer of moistened shredded paper and put the lid on the bin.
- You can keep the bin in a shady spot in your yard or inside your house. If possible, keep the bin in a covered area so moisture will not enter through the holes in the lid during the rainy season. See the Santa Cruz County Worm Composting brochure for more information.

First feeding

It's important to feed your worms right away. The first feeding is like stocking an empty refrigerator. Start your worms out with 2-3 quarts of fruit and vegetable scraps. Include some soft foods that will decompose quickly. Mix the food with 2 cups of cornmeal which will help to tide the worms over until the food scraps start to decompose. (Note: Cornmeal is used only for the first feeding.) Pull the shredded paper back and put the scraps under it in a spot near the worms. Then replace the shredded paper to cover the food scraps and replace the lid.

Do Feed

Fruit and vegetable scraps--
Mold and rot are fine!
Avoid overfeeding citrus--should
be no more than 1/5 of food
Coffee grounds, filters and teabags
Egg shells, breads and grains
Paper towels and tissues



Do Not Feed

Meat, fish, dairy products, butter, greasy foods,
pet waste

Weekly feedings

Wait about a week before adding more scraps. Add about a quart per week and adjust the amount of scraps upward gradually as your worm population grows. When your system is fully functioning, you will be able to cover about half of the surface of the working tray with one inch of food scraps every week.

Adding working trays

- When the first tray is full to the top, it is time to add the second tray. Use a trowel to move an inch of the food scraps and compost into an empty working tray. This will provide a good environment for the worms, who will move up into the new tray as you put food in it. The material in the lower working tray should come in complete contact with the bottom of the tray on top of it. It will shrink as it decomposes and eventually the tray will rest on the ribs of the lower tray. Feed and cover the new tray with dampened shredded newspaper. The worms will move up to eat the food in it.
- When the second tray is full, add the third working tray in the same way you added the second.

Remove the castings

When all three trays are full, remove the black, castings-rich material from the first working tray and use as you wish. Put the empty tray on top of the stack and continue the cycle.

Maintain the bin

- Keep the bedding a little wetter than a wrung out sponge. Food scraps are very moist, so you may never need to add water, and you might want to add dry shredded newspaper to dry the material out a bit.
- Keep the food covered with two inches of shredded paper. You will need to replenish the supply every few weeks.

- Leave the tap in the open position with a bucket underneath so you can catch the moisture and not risk making a bathtub in the bottom collector tray for your worms. An open tap also increases air flow to the trays. If you wish you can remove the tap completely to avoid potential tap clogging problems.
- The liquid that comes out of the tap is not 'worm tea.' It is excess moisture from the fruits and vegetables in the bin. Experts disagree on the value of the liquid and the effect it has on the health of plants--you can use it to water plants, but don't use it on sensitive plants.
- Material in the lower trays shrinks as it decomposes, so check once in a while to make sure the bedding is in contact with the tray above it. (Worms can't fly!)
- Clean out the collector tray once a year, rinsing the vents that are located at the top of the legs to maintain air flow to the system. Make sure the tap is not clogged.
- If the bin is too wobbly, remove the legs and place it on cement blocks, bricks or wood planks.
- If ants are a problem, put the legs in cups of water to prevent them from entering the bin. However, ants will not hurt the worms.

For more information

- Come to a Hands-On Wormshop. Worms are available at cost. Bins available free and below wholesale cost to residents of the unincorporated area and Scotts Valley. Pre-registration required. Call the Worm Doctor or visit the website.
- Order a copy of the Worm Composting brochure.

Learn more about composting
online:

www.compostsantacruzcounty.org



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