The Grapevine

What’s with the Worms???

My husband and I recently had a conversation about worms last week, we have unusual hobbies what can I say. I had been doing some research on vermicomposting over the last few months for work and I thought it might be a viable option for us to compost some of our kitchen waste while also supplying us with fishing bait. I had also won free worms when doing some research which might have prompted starting a worm composter a bit earlier than I might have originally planned on. Let’s take a peak at vermicomposting or worm composting and I’ll share some of what I learned.

Vermiculture (raising worms) and vermicomposting (composting with worms) are growing in popularity because they are a great way to compost kitchen food scraps. Vermicomposting is different from traditional composting that relies on microbes and fungi to break down the food versus vermicompost where the worms do most of the work. One benefit of vermicomposting is that you don’t have to aerate or turn the compost pile, the worms will manage that for you and the compost bin won’t give off heat (in fact heat is a bad thing in a worm bin). Worms can eat a variety of foods including fruit and vegetable scraps (avoid feeding large quantity of broccoli, cabbage, etc due to smell), tea bags, coffee grounds, pasta, cereal and bread. Food should be in smaller pieces (1/2”-1” to increase the rate of break down. I also recommend avoiding citrus, garlic, onions, dairy or meat products and highly acidic or spicy foods. Worms break down the food and turn it into rich worm castings that can be used as fertilizer in the garden or with your houseplants. A worm bin will also provide “compost tea” which is the excess liquid that needs to be drained from the bin and also works as a fertilizer for plants.

Worms in nature tend to live in dark, damp locations and we need to mimic these conditions in our worm bins. There are several commercially made bins that are available for purchase however you can also easily make one at home using plastic totes or a wooden box. One of the easiest ways to make a bin is using two 10 gallon plastic totes, they must be opaque (no clear totes, remember worms like dark). One of your totes will serve as the bottom and collect the “compost tea” so the worm bedding won’t get too wet (worm’s like damp but they will escape your bin if the bedding is too wet) and the other will serve as the composting bin. In the bottom of your composting bin drill approximately 20 1/4” holes (larger depending on the worm you choose, more on that later) to allow excess moisture to drain out. You will also drill a row of holes approximately 2” apart on the side of the bin near the top to allow air flow in the bin. The bin pictured on the right uses larger holes with vents instead of the smaller holes around the whole bin. The bottom bin needs no modification, simply place blocks or 4” pots in the bottom to hold the upper bin up to give the compost tea more room to collect. Once the bin is made, the worms need some bedding to live in. Some options for bedding include shredded paper, shredded cardboard, commercially made worm bedding, coco coir and a mix of the above with decaying leaves. It’s best to have a layer of bedding approximately 8” deep, the worms are surface feeders so deeper bedding doesn’t make sense for them. Make sure the bedding stays damp (like a wrung-out sponge) so misting may be necessary once a week or so.

The final step is the worms. Unfortunately, earthworms from the backyard are not good composting worms. They tend to be solitary, feed deeper underground and don’t eat enough to be effective composters. The most commonly used worm and probably the best are Red Wigglers which go by the scientific name Eisenia fetida. They are easy to find either online or you might be able to find people locally that have some for sale as well. I choose to use European nightcrawlers or European “Super worms” in my bin. They are supposed to be almost as good composters as the Red Wigglers but they are similar in size to an earthworm I would find outside. Worms do need to stay between 55-80 degrees
Worm composting is a great alternative to composting outdoors, especially in the winter time. A pound of Red wigglers can consume a pound of produce a week on average. I can’t wait to see how my worm composter works, especially now that they are back in their bin (my bedding was too damp to begin with, oops). Look for classes on vermicomposting in the future!!! If you want to watch a video on making a Worm Bin check out this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sl1M6NOOzIA&t=6s
For a more informative video check out Scott Eckert’s video on Vermicomposting from the K-STATE Garden Hour: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8CCg7bb66U

Reminders-
- During warm spells this winter, be sure to water newly planted trees and shrubs in your landscape. Even trees that have been planted in the last 2-3 years will benefit from some watering during the winter. An easy method of watering is to take a 5-gallon bucket, drill a 1/8” hole in the bottom and place the full bucket near your tree to let the water drip out. After it empties move it to the other side of the tree and fill it again. Be sure to try to water at least 12” into the soil if you are using a sprinkler system. Deeper watering is more important than frequent watering to encourage the new root system to grow.

Upcoming Events
- **February 2, 2022: Indoor Seed Starting**
  Discover the fun of starting your gardening season off early by growing your own bedding plants indoors. Learn the steps to growing healthy plants you can transplant into the garden this spring. Gregg Eyestone, Riley County Horticulture Extension Agent, will explain how to save money growing those hard-to-find plants you want in your garden this year! Register here: https://ksu.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_2MfHtfkEQS6qI8Q_vr90YA

- **February 12th, 2022: Seed Swap**
  The Wichita Heirloom Seed Traders group will be holding a seed swap at the Andover Public Library on February 12th at 1 pm. Bring some extra seeds to trade and learn some tips on starting seeds.

- **February 19th, 2022: Fruit Tree Pruning**
  Fruit tree pruning can be intimidating to a newbie or maybe you bought a home with an older fruit tree that is overgrown. Carl Jarboe, a local horticulturist and expert, will walk you through pruning fruit trees as pruning is necessary for a tree to thrive and produce abundant fresh fruit. At the training, attendees will learn how to set the base structure of a fruit tree and reasons behind pruning. After the demonstration we will supervise as everyone tries their hand. Participants should bring their own pruning tool and we will talk about sanitation and proper pruning. Contact our office to register so we know how many people to expect!!! Register at: https://kstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8Bo3J9Vfs9mcr4