



Worm Composting Myth Busters

Think you know everything about worm composting? Think again. Below are some common recycling myths and the truth behind the tales.

Myth: Any type of worm is suitable for your compost.

Truth: Not all worm species are identical, and in fact, of the 1,800 species of earthworms found around the world, only two species of redworms are used regularly to assist the composting process. These beneficial redworms can be acquired from a worm grower or you can take some from a friend's bin since they will keep multiplying. To keep your worms healthy, harvest at least once a year. Worms do not like living in their castings (the compost).

Myth: Compost smells bad.

Truth: Compost, if done correctly, will not smell. If your compost smells, there could be many causes. Sometimes it can smell if the bin is too wet. Try not to overfeed the worms or give them very wet scraps. Add dry bedding (newspaper or other shredded black and white paper) and stop feeding for a couple weeks until the bin's moisture levels have equalized. Another reason for bad smells is adding the wrong food to the bin. See the resources on the other side of this sheet for websites regarding food that is good and bad for the bin. In general, you want to avoid meat, dairy, and oily food.

Myth: Compost attracts flies and rodents.

Truth: A worm bin should not attract flies or rodents. So long as you have considered these tips: Be sure to bury the scraps deep down in the bin beneath the bedding. This makes it easier for the worms to get to the food, and deters flies since they will not notice the food and (if they do, they will not want to dig deep down to get it). Also, be sure you are avoiding problem foods that rodents like, such as meat.

Myth: Compost takes too long.

Truth: Composting does take patience, but it is well worth the rewards. Typically, you can harvest your compost in 2-6 months depending on how often and how much you are feeding your worms. Keep in mind the worms will double in population quickly after their first few weeks in their new home so you will create more and more compost. Plus, one of the more important benefits (waste reduction) is immediate!

Myth: You should leave your worm bin outside.

Truth: The worms in your bin need specific conditions to be in a comfortable eating environment. Store the bin in a cool, dry place (between 55°-77°F). Make sure it will not freeze or overheat. Common locations include a pantry, laundry room, under the sink, or basement. Or you can keep your bin in your garage or porch area, and move it inside or insulate it during the winter.

Myth: I don't have a garden so I don't need to compost.

Truth: Once you have harvested your compost, you can use it in many different ways. You can sprinkle it on your houseplants to add much needed nutrients. You can also use it on your lawn or around trees. Again, the compost will NOT attract rodents as it is now a soil-like substance that smells like rich earth.

Sources: University of Illinois Extension, Composting – www.urbanext.illinois.edu/homecomposting/worm.html
Common Composting Myths – www.earth911.com/recycling/garden/composting/13-common-myths-of-composting/



Know Your Worm Composting Facts

Worm composting is fun and it helps reduce waste. Did you know ...

- ❖ In 2009, **243 million tons** of municipal solid waste or MSW (more commonly known as trash or garbage) were generated in the United States. Organic materials—comprised of yard trimmings, food scraps, wood waste, and paper and paperboard products—are the largest component of our trash and make up more than two-thirds of the solid waste stream.
- ❖ The City of Chicago's Department of Environment conducted a waste characterization study in 2009 and discovered that **29% of the waste that is discarded in Chicago is organics** (biodegradable plant or animal products). Some of this waste can be recycled through composting and used as a nutritious soil builder. Do your part at home by composting with worms or an outdoor compost bin (or both!) to keep organic waste out of landfills.
- ❖ **Slime**, a secretion of worms, contains nitrogen. Nitrogen is an important nutrient for plants. The sticky slime helps to hold clusters of soil particles together in formations called aggregates. If a worm's skin dries out, it will die.
- ❖ Baby worms hatch from **cocoons** smaller than a grain of rice. You will notice these in your compost; try to avoid removing them.
- ❖ Worm compost is also called worm **castings**, another way of saying worm waste or poop.
- ❖ Worms can eat their weight each day. One pound of mature worms (approximately 800-1,000 worms) can eat up to **half a pound of organic material per day**. It typically takes three to four months for these worms to produce harvestable castings, which can be used in potting soil. Vermicomposting also produces compost or "worm" tea, a high-quality liquid fertilizer for house plants or gardens.



Sources: University of Illinois Extension, *The Adventures of Herman the Worm* – www.urbanext.illinois.edu/worms/
US EPA Vermicomposting – www.epa.gov/osw/conserve/rrr/composting/vermi.htm

What resources are available in Chicago?

- ❖ The Chicago Department of Environment's Chicago Conservation Corps hosts many resources on the C3 website including instructional worm composting guides. C3 also offers training for Chicago residents and CPS teachers to implement worm composting projects in their community or school. For more information, visit www.chicagoconservationcorps.org or call 311.
- ❖ The University of Illinois Extension offers in-depth information on composting at home. For more information, visit <http://urbanext.illinois.edu/homecomposting/>.