



KIDS DIG WORM COMPOSTING

Red wigglers turn kitchen scraps into gardening gold.

by Jessica Iclisoy

Your family loves to shop at area farmers' markets, investigating greens and other veggies to make meals bursting with vitamins and minerals. Yet, it's not always easy raising children who love to eat the fruits, veggies and salads you tote home. So consider mixing in a strategic science lesson—all you need are a few thousand wiggly worm friends to gobble up kitchen scraps; waste that would normally go into the trash and municipal landfill. For kids, worm composting gives food preparation a special mission: The worms must be fed!

Worm composting, also known as vermiculture, produces nutrient-rich worm castings. In kid parlance, that's "worm poop." This organic matter provides the perfect soil conditioner and organic food for plants, indoors and out. It's also easy to harvest the liquid

(worm tea) from the compost and dilute it with water to sprinkle any garden with an extra dose of natural fertilizer. Both will promote strong, healthy plants that are resistant to disease.

Our family has maintained a four-level worm bin just outside our kitchen door for five years, and for me the hardest part of getting started was opening the box of wigglers. Now, we have more worm castings and worm tea than I can use, so I routinely pack up the castings into resealable plastic bags, pour the tea into bottles, and use both as much-welcomed gifts.

■ Newspaper provides cover. Shred or tear old newspapers into strips and place a fluffy layer on top to cover food scraps and discourage flies. Also use paper on the bottom to provide bedding for the worms.

■ Keep the worm bin moist. Periodic spritzing with a spray bottle or fine mist from the hose will keep wigglers moisturized and on the move.

■ Worms prefer a vegetarian diet; so don't add cheese or meat scraps to the compost pile. Do feel free to toss in cereal, grains and rinsed, crushed eggshells. If possible, chop up all vegetable waste prior to adding it to your bin to speed up the composting process.

Jessica Iclisoy, the founder of California Baby natural baby care products, writes about natural living and backyard organic gardening in Beverly Hills, CA. She also maintains two worm bins and three composters. Connect at Jessica@CaliforniaBaby.com.

A well-designed worm composter is opaque and has a secure lid and ventilation holes. Peaceful Valley Farm & Garden Supply, in Grass Valley, California, offers both a deluxe bin and inexpensive do-it-yourself worm bin kit at GrowOrganic.com. Or, find step-by-step instructions to build your own at the educational website, RedWormComposting.com, which also lists reputable sources for worms (the pictures alone are enough to juice kids' interest).

Keep these tips in mind for successful composting, indoors or out:

■ The best worms for composting are red wigglers. According to the Peaceful Valley company, one or two pounds of mature red worms can convert 3.5 to 7 pounds of food scraps into castings in one week.