

Setting up an indoor worm compost bin

You need:

A plastic tub with a secure lid (file folder sized bin ideal)

Newspaper

Water - either pond water, or tap water that has been standing a day or so to release the chlorine

Worms in a little soil - "red wigglers", from an outdoor compost bin, or order from wormworx.ca

Old vegetables and plant trimmings (avoid fruit peels as they attract fruit flies)

To make your compost bin:

1. Soak half sheets of newspaper in water and make balls. Make enough balls to cover the bottom of your compost bin. These keep the bottom of the bin moist and will slowly get eaten up by the worms.
2. Add a layer of worms in soil (make sure they are in enough soil to start that they won't dry out).
3. Add a layer of old vegetables, followed by a little more soil.
4. Tear up newspaper into narrow strips, and throw them on top like a blanket for the worms. This keeps the moisture in and keeps the fruit flies out. It will eventually get damp and compost down with the rest of the newspaper.

Maintaining your compost bin:

Your bin should be placed in an area away from direct sunlight, and as far as possible from the heater as possible. It's best to often check on the bin and get a feeling for the conditions, rather than sticking to a strict schedule.

Water

Check every few days that the soil in the bin is moist but not wet. Push aside some of the newspaper blanket and feel the soil with your finger. It is similar to house plants – it should feel moist but not soggy. If it is a little dry, push back all the dry pieces of newspaper and sprinkle some water over the soil and old vegetable pieces. Do not over-water or other animals will take over (worm mites will kill the worms). You will need different amounts of water at different times of year - depending on how hot the room is and what the weather is like outside.

Food

Feed the worms old vegetables once the last food has gone completely. Even if they don't have greens for a while, they will be fine eating the newspaper. Do not add more worm food before the old vegetables are gone, or mould may start to grow. A healthy worm bin smells like soil (a fresh, outdoors, earthy smell). If you add tomatoes or cucumber or anything with a lot of water in it, they can make the bin very wet, and can grow mould easily, so alternate with tougher greens, or skip wet vegetables entirely. Depending on how many worms you have, you might add food every two weeks or as little as once every two months.

Newspaper blanket

When you add more food, turn the previous (now wet) newspaper strips from the top into the bin into the worms and soil. After adding more food, tear up new strips for a new blanket. This will be every two weeks to once every two months.

The paper in the soil will help it stay light so that air can get down to the worms. The blanket stops the soil from drying out so fast, and keeps fruit flies out.

Harvesting your compost:

After a couple of months, or at the end of the school year (spring is ideal) you can harvest the compost and use it to fertilize indoor plants or an outdoor garden. The compost is a rich soil that is actually worm poop - "faeces".

Here's how: Take off the top layers of dry newspaper pieces and vegetables that are not yet rotten. You can use these again. Dump the bin out into a shallow tray. Separate the compost from the worms (look out for worm eggs! They are reddish/brown, shiny and about 1mm long). Keep the worms in some compost to start a new compost bin. Put the compost around the stems of plants you want to fertilize. If you want to compost more, start it with the same worms. If you are done, put the worms in an outdoor compost or just in a garden bed.

More information on maintaining compost bins:

<http://compost.css.cornell.edu/worms/moreworms.html>

<http://www.cityfarmer.org/wormcomp61.html>

Worms eat my Garbage by Mary Appelhof (Flower Press)