Worm Farming FAQ
The Secret Life of Worms

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What is Worm Farming?
Worm farming, sometimes known as vermiculture, is another popular method of processing food scraps into rich soil fertiliser. Certain varieties, like Tiger worms, are perfectly suited to this practice and are popping up in backyards and garages all over the country. Compost worms can eat half their body-weight in food every day and produce a potent fertiliser and soil amendment for your garden or pot plants. Worms love most fruit and veg scraps, tea bags, coffee grounds, soggy paper and cardboard, but you should always avoid placing large amounts of citrus, onion, dairy and meat in your worm farm. Worms need a shaded position in summer and will process materials faster if they are shredded or chopped into small pieces.

What should I do with my worms during a heatwave?
Your worms will start to get stressed when the temperature of their bedding passes 30°C, or if it becomes dry. During summer you need to make sure that your worm farm is placed in a cool, shaded location, and that you check and adjust the moisture levels regularly. Remember that the ideal moisture level is a few drops from a squeezed handful of bedding. On extremely hot days, it may help to add ice blocks and place a wet towel or hessian bag over the worm farm and hose down with cool water. We also recommend bringing your worm farm inside where the temperature is less extreme.
More detailed information about looking after worms during heatwaves is found by clicking on the document link below and also further down on this page, under ‘Tips & Troubleshooting’.
IMPORTANT NOTICE: How to look after worms during a Heatwave

Worms become stressed when their bedding is too hot or too dry. During summer you need to keep your worm farm in a cool, shady spot & regularly check moisture levels.

On extremely hot days, we recommend bringing your worm farm inside if you have an insulated/cooled place (e.g. laundry or bathroom).

Here are some more important tips:

1. Worm farms must be in full shade for the whole day during Summer
2. Food waste breaking down (and the worms themselves) also generate heat, so don’t add food scraps to your worm farms when extreme heat is predicted.
3. A bedding (not air) temperature of over 35°C is lethal for worms (So even if your worm farm is in the shade and damp, it may still be too hot for them to survive). Worms ‘balling’ on the surface (big clumps of worms) or worms trying to leave the worm farm are indicators of stress. You need to take urgent action.
4. Bedding with less than 50% moisture is also dangerous. Remember that the ideal moisture level is a few drops from a squeezed handful of bedding.
5. If your worm farm cannot be relocated inside, make a big 1-2L ice block (an ice-cream or a takeaway container is ideal; as small ice cubes will melt too quickly) and leave on surface of worm bedding or hessian/blanket (see photo below).
6. Putting ice directly on top of worms will kill them, so don’t put ice directly on top of a big clump of worms if they are ‘balling’ on the surface. Instead put ice on the surface of hessian/blanket covering your worm bedding.
7. If the temperature is unlikely to drop at night, add a block of ice in the evening.

Photo: Example of ice blocks (made using 1L takeaway containers) added to the top of a worm farm to keep it cool during hot weather.
What is a worm farm?
A worm farm is a home for compost worms which are a specific type of earthworm that can live in large populations and feed on fresh organic matter such as your kitchen scraps.

Why have a worm farm?
By turning your food scraps into worm castings you are preventing the release of methane (a potent greenhouse gas) from landfill, and reconnecting the food cycle by creating a rich, free fertiliser to produce more food. Worm castings have many benefits to soil such as:

- Adding a slow release source of macro and micro nutrients
- Creating excellent soil structure which assists with aeration, water and root penetration
- Increasing the ability of your soil to catch and store water, reducing the amount of irrigation required
- Adding a population of beneficial microorganisms to your soil which assist with soil health, pest and disease control
- Plus these wiggly worms make excellent and educational companions for kids!

Doesn’t my organic waste break down in landfill anyway?
Many people imagine that food scraps in landfill quickly break down into soil anyway – but unfortunately this isn’t the case. Soil microorganisms require moisture and oxygen to transform organic waste but, in contrast, landfill sites are compacted (anaerobic) and kept dry to minimise leaching. This means that materials that can decompose rapidly under the right conditions (including food scraps, garden prunings, paper, cardboard, biodegradable bags etc.) will take centuries to break down in landfill, while releasing methane (a potent greenhouse gas). In fact, researchers from the University of Arizona excavating a landfill site uncovered 25 year old hot dogs, corn cobs and grapes still recognisable, and 50 year old newspapers that were still readable!*

Composting and worm farming, in contrast, are aerobic processes that quickly break down organic matter into rich soil fertiliser, preventing the release of methane.


How much space do I need for a worm farm?
A worm farm is approximately L40xW40xH50cm – they take up very little space and are suitable for small courtyards, balconies or even inside in laundries if well maintained.
Where should I put my worm farm?

Your worm farm needs to be in full shade in Summer to prevent worms from overheating, drying out and dying, but sun in Winter is beneficial to keep your worms active and processing your food waste. You can move your worm farm around to suit the season, or position it underneath a deciduous tree that will lose it’s leaves in Winter! It’s a good idea to put your worm farm as close to your kitchen as possible so that it’s convenient to add scraps and you notice if it needs attention.

What materials can I put in my worm farm?

Worms will technically eat anything that has once lived, but they do have preferences and adding too much of the wrong foods can unbalance the pH, create smells/mould or attract flies and rodents. Download or print our colourful Worm Farm poster guide.

Beginner worm farmers can add:
- fruit and vegetable scraps
- cooked food
- coffee grounds & tea bags
- eggshells

Experienced worm farmers can add:
- bread
- pasta

Never add:
- meat & fish
- cooking oils
- citrus & onions
- dairy products
- plastics, metals & chemicals
- weeds & diseased plants
- glossy magazines & brochures
- gum leaves

Here’s a few more pointers:
- Worms – like humans – thrive best on a balanced diet! It’s a good idea to regularly add moist carbon-rich foods like autumn leaves, soaked paper/cardboard or straw to balance your nitrogen-rich food scraps.
- Worms require a moist (but not saturated) environment. Often food scraps will provide enough moisture but it’s a good idea to occasionally check moisture levels by squeezing a handful of bedding – you should get a few drops but no more.
- Worms have tiny mouths so if you’d like your worms to eat scraps more quickly, chop everything into smaller pieces.

How much can worms eat?
Worms can eat up to their own body weight every day. If you got your worm farm through the us at the Food Know How program, then your package contained 1,000 worms, which means that the worms should be able to consume up to 200-250 grams of food scraps per day once they are settled in (see above).

Tips & Troubleshooting

My worms aren’t eating much food – am I doing something wrong?
It takes a little time for worms to acclimatise when added to a new worm farm system. In fact, it may take up to 4-6 weeks for worms to settle in & work their way through the coconut fibre bedding that they are packaged in (as they love this stuff and they may prefer it over any food scraps that you add until they have munched their way through it). However, it is worth being patient, as worms breed quickly and can double their population in 2-3 months, under the right conditions.

How can I help speed up the worm breeding process?
Some tips are below to ensure your worms are reproducing:
1) Feed small amounts of food and check that the foods you’ve added are mostly eaten before adding more. Small pieces of food & ‘soft’ foods (e.g. banana, watermelon, cantaloupe etc.) will be eaten faster.
2) It is important to check moisture levels of the bedding to ensure you maintain a moist environment (i.e. not dripping wet, but definitely damp to the touch). This will mean that the worms won’t have to work as hard to breathe, eat or process food.
3) Oxygen is also required to provide the right conditions for worm eggs to hatch. Gently aerate bedding with gloved hands or using a garden fork, approx once a week.
4) Avoid adding more shredded paper or cardboard in the worm farm until they start eating the food scraps. If you are using cardboard or newspaper as a ‘lid’ for the worm tray, try replacing this with an old towel, which is a less attractive meal to the worms!
More tips:

- If you want to get things going faster, you can buy some more worms from places like CERES, your local nursery or hardware store. They are usually sold in kits of 1,000 for around $30.
- Also, try looking for little eggs (tiny yellow bulbs) and baby worms (smaller, thinner worms – baby worms can be hard to spot as they are tiny white worms) which indicate a happy growing worm population.

My worm farm smells bad – what should I do?

A well managed worm farm should smell pleasant and earthy. If your worm farm smells, it’s likely that too much food has been added. Try the following steps:

1) Remove any uneaten foods.
2) Check moisture level by squeezing a handful of bedding – you should get just a few drops. Check drainage if it seems too wet.
3) Aerate bedding (gently!) with a garden fork.
4) Feed a small amount of the right foods.
5) Cover food and surface with a thin layer of moist carbon-rich materials (e.g. autumn leaves, soaked paper or cardboard or straw).
6) Check that the foods you’ve added are mostly eaten before adding more.
7) Be patient! Given the right conditions your worms will breed and develop more ability to process your food waste over time.

There are lots of other creatures in my worm farm – is this a problem?

It’s great to have a multicultural worm farm! Beetles, springtails, slaters, earwigs, mites and the occasional slug or snail are all participating in the decomposition process. However, some species can indicate problems or food imbalances:

- Lots of ants in your worm farm mean it’s either too dry or you’ve added a sweet food.
- Vinegar flies (tiny flies that hover around the farm) usually indicate overfeeding (see FAQ below)
- Rodents and flies can be excluded by a tight lid and are less likely if dairy and meat scraps are avoided.

Why are there lots of little flies hovering around my worm farm?

A well-managed worm farm does not smell or attract flies. However if your worm farm is unbalanced or overfed, vinegar flies can be attracted to rotting food and can quickly build up large populations in
your worm farm. While there is no instant fix, these steps will bring the population of flies down as soon as possible:
1) Destroy the fly breeding ground by removing any uneaten foods.
2) Gently aerate bedding with gloved hands or using a garden fork and mix through some shredded, moistened newspaper to help counter the effects of overfeeding.
3) Leave for a few days, then feed small amounts of food and check that the foods you’ve added are mostly eaten before adding more. Small pieces of food will be eaten faster.
4) If the flies are a nuisance you can set traps to bring down fly populations faster. Stir ¼ cup vinegar, ¼ cup water and a squeeze of dishwashing detergent in a cup and place near your worm farm. Flies are attracted to the vinegar and the dishwashing liquid reduces the surface tension so they drown. Alternatively you could buy sticky yellow insect traps from a nursery.

Example of simple homemade vinegar fly trap

More ideas:
- Try planting some dense shrubs around your worm farm to provide habitat for small insectivorous birds that love to feed on vinegar flies.
- Position your worm farm so that a few flies aren’t a problem, and accept occasional vinegar flies as part of the natural decomposition cycle!
- Some people find that a light dusting of dolomite watered in once a month can help to balance the pH of worm bedding and reduce vinegar flies.
- Some people find that covering the surface of their worm farm with hessian or an old woolen blanket reduces vinegar fly activity.

I’m going on holiday – how should I look after my worms?

Make sure your worm farm is in a cool, shaded location. Adjust water levels until you get a few drops when you squeeze a handful of bedding. Feed your worms and place some soggy straw, newspaper, cardboard in the worm farm to provide extra food and protect bedding from drying out. If extreme heat is likely or you are going to be away for more than 3-4 weeks, ask a friend or neighbour to feed and maintain moisture levels.
What should I do with my worms during a heatwave?

Your worms will start to get stressed when the temperature of their bedding passes 30°C, or if it becomes dry. During summer you need to make sure that your worm farm is placed in a cool, shaded location, and that you check and adjust the moisture levels regularly. Remember that the ideal moisture level is a few drops from a squeezed handful of bedding. On extremely hot days, it may help to add ice blocks and place a wet towel or hessian bag over the worm farm and hose down with cool water. We also recommend bringing your worm farm inside where the temperature is less extreme.

Here are some more important tips:

- Worm farms must be in full shade for the whole day during Summer
- A bedding (not air) temperature of over 35 degrees is lethal for compost worms (Therefore even if your worm farm is in the shade and damp, it may still be too hot for them to survive)
- Bedding with less than 50% moisture is also dangerous. Remember that the ideal moisture level is a few drops from a squeezed handful of bedding (70-90% moisture)
- Food waste breaking down (and the worms themselves) also generate heat, so don’t add food scraps to your worm farms when extreme heat is predicted.
- Worms ‘balling’ on the surface (big clumps of worms) or worms trying to leave the worm farm are indicators of stress and the need to take urgent action
- By far the easiest strategy is to pre-emptively bring your worms inside if you have an insulated/cooled space in your laundry or bathroom
- If not, make big 1-3L ice blocks (small ice cubes will melt too quickly) and leave on surface of worm bedding/hessian/blanket when heatwave is forecast (an ice-cream container or a takeaway container is ideal) **See photo below
- Putting ice directly on top of worms will kill them (they can’t move out of the way when cold), so don’t put ice directly on top of a big clump of worms if they are ‘balling’ on the surface. It’s a good idea to put ice on the surface of hessian/blanket covering your worm bedding.
- If the temperature is unlikely to drop at night, give the worms a big block of ice in the evening to get them through the night. The ice will provide water as well as cooling, so you may need to aerate the bedding to help with drainage if adding ice over several days.
Example of ice blocks (made using 1L takeaway containers) added to the top of a worm farm to keep it cool during hot weather.

How do I harvest my worm castings?

Worm castings that are ready to be harvested look like dark soil and smell pleasantly earthy. When a tray in your worm farm is full, you can place an empty tray on top and begin feeding in this layer. Gradually the worms will move up into this tray and you will be left with a tray of castings for your garden. Alternatively you can feed the worms on one side of the tray for a few weeks and harvest castings from the opposite side, or place the tray of castings, uncovered, in a sunny location for an hour or so, and gradually scrape layers of castings from the surface as the worms burrow away from the light.

What should I do with my worm castings and juice?

Worm castings are an excellent slow-release fertiliser and can be used on pot plants, vegies, fruit trees, and ornamentals. Worm castings have many other benefits besides nutrients – it contains beneficial microorganisms that help create healthy soil structure, allow plants to access nutrients in your existing soil and protect them from pests and disease. Worm castings also retain water in your soil and help your garden survive during droughts. Unlike other fertilisers, you can’t ‘burn’ plants with too much, so apply freely to moist soil and either dig in or cover with mulch. The liquid that drains from your worm farm is also an excellent fertiliser. You can apply this to your plants straight or dilute for wider coverage.