

TURN KITCHEN SCRAPS INTO NUTRIENT-RICH COMPOST

It's harvest season and with all those garden-fresh vegetables comes lots of vegetable scraps. Don't throw these away. Keep this valuable resource out of the landfill and convert it into compost for gardens while raising red worms for the fishing enthusiasts in the family.

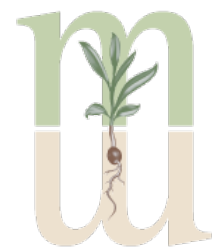
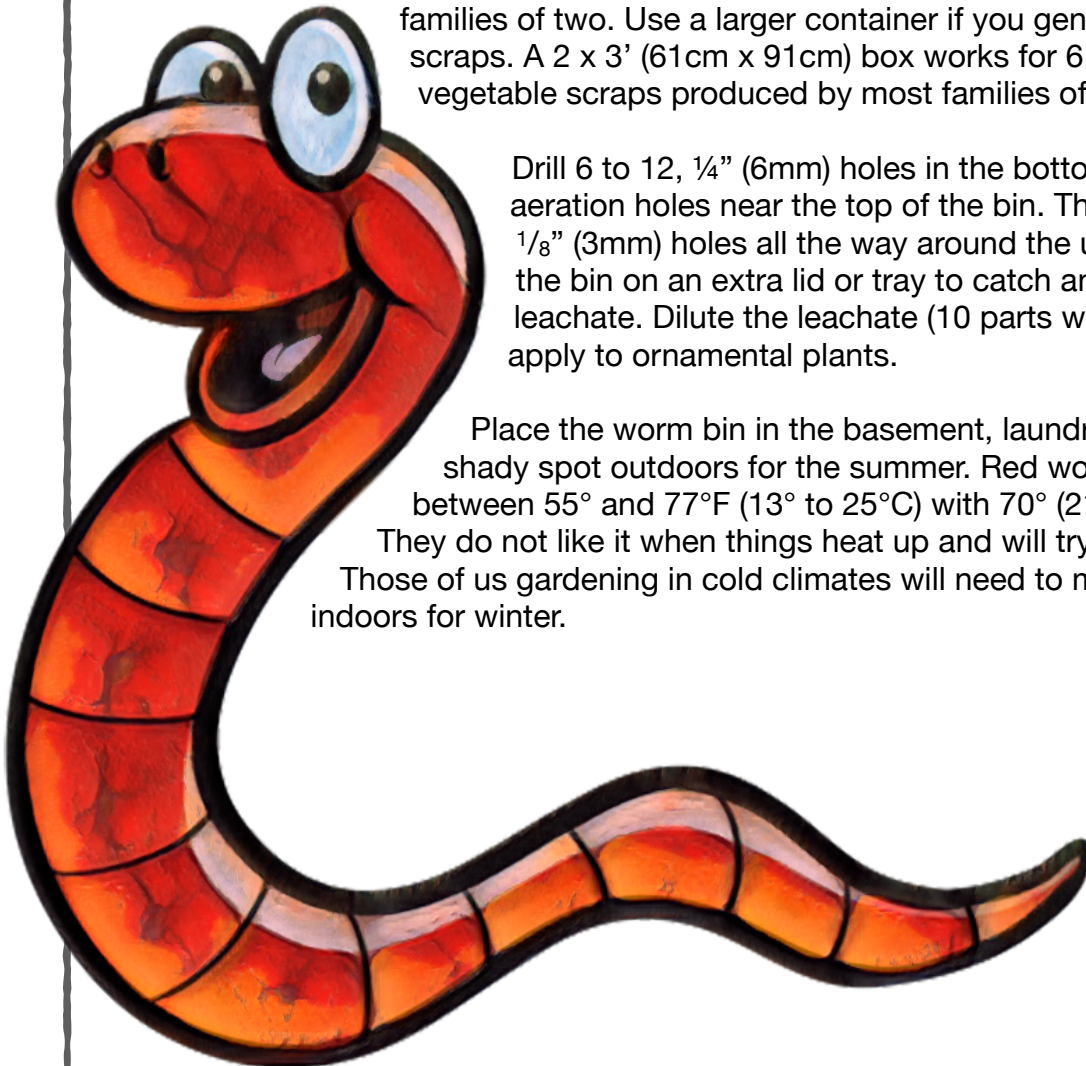
Worm composting, also known as vermicomposting, is fast, fun, and easy. All you need is a plastic container, shredded paper, a handful of soil or compost, and red wiggler worms.

Purchase at least one pound (about 1,000) of red wigglers or other composting worms to get you started. A pound of red wigglers will compost 2 pounds of food scraps a week. Buy the worms from a worm farmer – you may need to order from an online source. You can buy them from a bait shop, but you may be spending more for that pound of worms. Some bait stores sell worms by the flat, making it more economical.

Purchase a worm farm or make your own. Just convert a plastic container that is at least 8 to 20 inches (20 to 50cm) deep into your worm bin. A 2 x 2' (61cm x 61cm) box will handle 3.5 pounds (1.6kg) of vegetable scraps each week. This is sufficient for most families of two. Use a larger container if you generate more vegetable scraps. A 2 x 3' (61cm x 91cm) box works for 6 pounds (2.7kg) of vegetable scraps produced by most families of four in a week.

Drill 6 to 12, 1/4" (6mm) holes in the bottom for drainage. Add aeration holes near the top of the bin. The easiest option is to drill 1/8" (3mm) holes all the way around the upper sides of the bin. Set the bin on an extra lid or tray to catch any liquid known as leachate. Dilute the leachate (10 parts water:1 part leachate) and apply to ornamental plants.

Place the worm bin in the basement, laundry room, garage, or a shady spot outdoors for the summer. Red worms prefer temperatures between 55° and 77°F (13° to 25°C) with 70° (21°C) degrees being ideal. They do not like it when things heat up and will try to escape or die trying. Those of us gardening in cold climates will need to move our worm bins indoors for winter.



Rip newspaper or shred computer or other non-glossy paper into narrow strips. Soak this bedding in water for 5 to 10 minutes. Squeeze out excess water so the paper is moist like a damp sponge.

Fill the bin at least halfway with bedding. This is about 4 to 6 pounds (1.8 to 2.7kg) of dry weight of bedding for small containers and 9 to 14 pounds (4 to 6kg) for larger bins. One-third of the bedding can be peat moss, coir, or decaying leaves to improve water retention and aeration as needed. Add a handful of compost or soil from a healthy garden. This adds beneficial organisms that help the worms break down the food scraps.

Collect plant-based kitchen scraps, coffee filters, tea bags, egg shells and shredded garden trimmings to feed your worms. Don't feed them meat, fish, dairy, bones, or fat. Store your plant-based food scraps in a plastic, metal, or bamboo container next to or under the sink or in a bag in the freezer. A plastic gallon ice cream bucket with a lid makes a great budget-wise container.

Place red worms on the surface of the moist bedding and watch them move under the cover of the bedding. Give them a couple of days to adjust to their new home before adding food scraps.

Place food scraps in one corner of the bin and cover with 1 to 2" (2.5 to 5cm) of bedding. If possible, wait for them to compost these before adding more. Place the next batch of food scraps next to the first and continue working your way around the bin. This keeps the worms moving into fresh bedding. Use a plant mister to moisten the bedding as needed.

Watch as the wrigglers turn the food scraps and bedding into nutrient-rich compost called worm castings. Add fresh bedding when the original bedding is dark, and the volume has decreased. This is usually after a couple of months. Move the composted bedding to one side of the container. Place fresh bedding in the other half next to the finished compost. Add vegetable scraps to the fresh bedding to encourage the worms to move out of the finished compost.

Harvest the worm castings and use them as a soil amendment or fertilizer for houseplants, containers, and gardens. Harvest the worms as needed for fishing, starting new worm bins, or sharing with others who want to start their own worm farm.

Vermicomposting is a great way to get the non-gardeners in your family excited about growing vegetables. You might even get them to pull a few weeds.

