

# Harvesting Your Worm Bin

*Finally all your caring and feeding of worms is going to pay off! Time to glean the finest of all natural fertilizers—earthworm castings!*

## WHEN TO HARVEST

After your bin has been up and running for two or three months, you'll see a significant amount of vermicompost. When to harvest is really up to you. You can wait until you have four or five inches of compost and your bin is nearly overflowing, or you can harvest what's there now. Do you need the castings right away, or do you want to wait and save up for one big harvest later on? *Are you most interested in producing a high population of worms, a lot of vermicompost, or both?*

## EARLY HARVEST: 2-3 MONTHS

After just a few months' operation, your worm population is high and, if conditions in the bin are good, it's still growing. If worms are what

**"I want more worms!"**

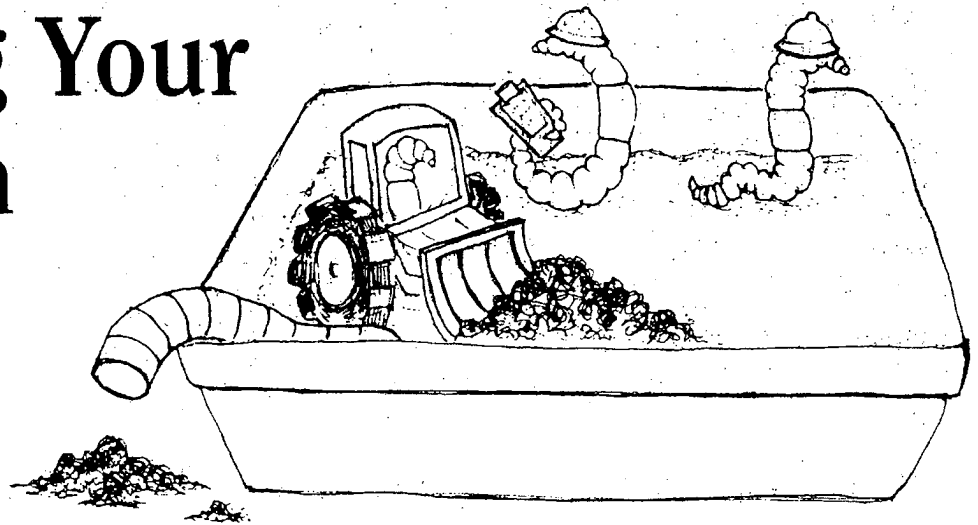
you're after, go ahead and harvest now, and divide your worms into two bins. Giving them extra space now will cue them to keep reproducing. You will harvest some castings, though not as much as if you waited.

## LATER HARVEST: 4-6 MONTHS+

As you continue to operate your worm bin you'll see more and more nicely-decomposed vermicompost.

**"I want really dark, rich castings!"**

Your patience has paid off in rich fertilizer! At some point, stop feeding the bin and wait for more of the food and bedding to be consumed. How long you wait before actually



harvesting the vermicompost depends on how finished you want the material to look. Don't worry about starving the worms, they don't suffer even when left for several months in vermicompost. They will eventually grow smaller and fewer in number.

Whenever you choose to harvest, put any un-decomposed bedding and food waste in a pile to put back in the bin when you restart.

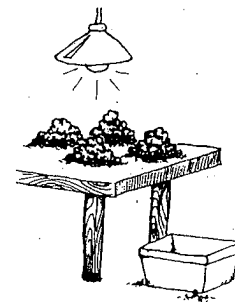
## HARVESTING: CATCH A THOUSAND WORMS BY THEIR TAILS?!

Now, that you've decided to harvest your vermicompost and rebed your worms, you're probably wondering how you're going to accomplish the separation. The worms are obviously all mixed up in the finished material, and naturally, you've begun to wonder if you'll be spending the night looking through a magnifying glass and using tweezers to remove the last worm. Well, you're in luck. There are several well-tested, easy and fun methods of harvesting vermicompost from your simple worm bin. Here are four of those methods.

### One: Dump and Sort

This one's the fun, hands-on method of worm bin harvesting. Dump the bin's entire contents on a table (lay plastic down first if you like) under a strong bulb or daylight and arrange the material into many small piles. Gradually, the worms

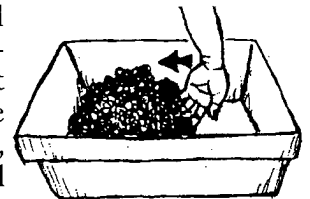
will move downward, away from the light. Scrape a small amount of vermicompost off each pile, until you see worms, then give them time to move downward again. Soon, you'll have dense piles of worms to re-



bed (which you should do quickly, to avoid exposing them to too much light and to dry air.)

### Two: Worms Sort Themselves

Move all the vermicompost to one side of the bin, then fill the empty side with



## Castings? Vermicompost?

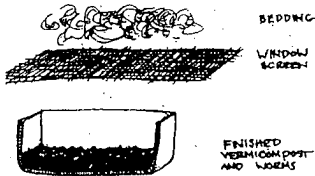
Worm compost (or vermicompost) contains worm castings (poop!), compost (stuff that's passed through other organisms) and undecomposed organic material

In the dark finished material at the bottom of your bin, it's likely that 75-95% of what's there is castings.

fresh, dampened bedding. Begin burying food on the newly bedded side only. As the food source in the old material runs out and is converted into vermicompost, the worms will move to the fresher side. Several months later, harvest the older material and repeat the process.

**Three: Window Screen Sort**

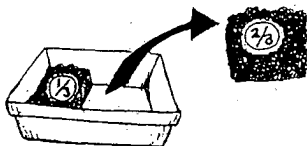
When it's nearly time to harvest, set a window screen (cut 6"/15cm wider than the bin all around) over the composting



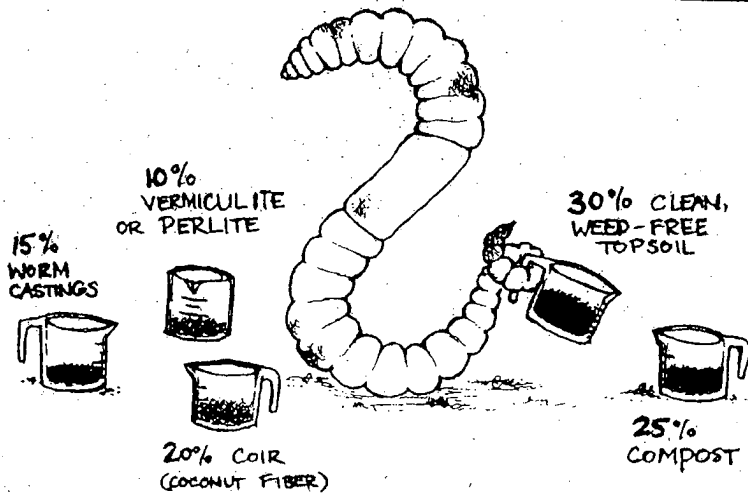
mass, then place fresh bedding on top and feed in this second layer. The worms will squeeze through as food runs out below and the food above attracts them. After a few months, take hold of the screen edges and lift it out. Harvest the finished material you find below, then dump the newer composting material onto the bottom of the bin and replace the screen.

**Four: Divide and Dump**

Truly the easiest method — just harvest about two-thirds of the vermicompost in the bin.



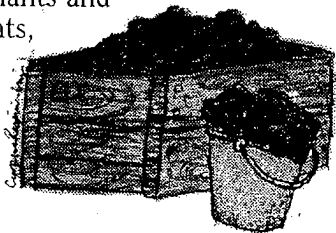
Never mind that you'll be removing worms — those left are enough to repopulate the bin in a few months' time. Remember, though, that this will slow down your bin's activity temporarily.



To make a terrific potting soil, mix 15% worm castings (or 25% vermicompost) and add 20% coconut fiber (or peat moss), 10% vermiculite or perlite, 30% topsoil and 25% compost.

**USING THE CASTINGS**

Worm castings are beneficial when used at all stages of plant development, beginning with your potting mix (see our recipe, above). When it's time to plant seeds or put starts outdoors, add worm compost (or more pure castings) to the bottom of the seed row or planting holes. For older plants and house plants, top dress twice during the growing season with a generous helping of vermicompost. Stir this lightly into the surface, or cover with a mulch, then water well.



*Harvesting methods (except Window Screen Sort) originally from Mary Appelhof's Worms Eat My Garbage.*



**Singing Worm Castings' Praises**

Earthworms' castings have unique characteristics that make them an absolutely ideal plant food. In soil, they hold water and release nutrients in a form well-suited to plants. They are a concentrated fertilizer that is most efficiently used as a portion of a planting mix, but still won't "burn" plants if applied more heavily. Laboratory trials show that even 10% vermicompost in potting mix improves germination rates, plant growth, appearance and fruiting. Castings also contain plant growth hormones that provide a strong "kick" to plants.

Castings also deliver beneficial microorganisms to the soil in huge numbers, and can thus impart some amount of disease resistance to plants, especially when worked into soil at the level of the root zone before planting.

What's more, research has shown that the vermicomposting process can reduce, and in certain tests, eliminate pathogens. Some farmers also know that worm castings can transmit disease resistance to animals. Chickens that scratch in worm beds, for example, eating worms and castings, are more resistant to salmonella. We definitely need and look forward to future research in this area.

**Castings Resources**

**Websites:**

Soil Foodweb, Inc.  
www.soilfoodweb.com

Yelm Earthworm & Castings Farm  
www.yelmworms.com