



Wriggle Me This: There's an art and a science to making rich, black soil, and for one would-be composter, it started with a handful of worms and a dream. Photo by [Nic Coury](#)

Worming My Way In

A food-waste rookie learns to dig vermicomposting

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Call me Lloyd Christmas, Jim Carey's character in *Dumb and Dumber*, who boasts, "I got worms!"

Only unlike Lloyd, my dream isn't to open a pet shop, but to keep food scraps out of landfills and transform them into the richest soil amendments.

My roommates didn't think my composting dream was so divine. One rolled her eyes and muttered, "Same rule that applies for the dog: As long as it doesn't smell, it can stay."

Stopwaste.org, organicconsumers.org and one-change.com proved useful. A pre-made bin (\$50-\$150) is convenient to assemble, but I decided to build a cheaper stacking plastic system.

One trip to Home Depot and I had two 10-gallon plastic storage containers, one lid, two bricks and a Tupperware container, all for \$14.

Most local nurseries have worms for sale. At Seaside Garden Center, they had my red worms ready when I arrived – a nice local deal at \$22, compared to online prices ranging \$20-\$30.

Another option: Monterey Regional Waste Management District has premade "Worm Wiggler" bins at \$49 for locals. MRWMD Education Coordinator Kimberle Herring offers workshops and brochures for first-time composters.

The key to a productive bin: simple science.

"Worms need oxygen, just like we do," she says. "They also need carbon, like newspaper, and nitrogen, in your food waste."

To make sure my worms got oxygen, I began hammering holes with a nail in the sides and top of one of my storage bins. This did not work so well. The plastic cracked straight down the side, which led me back to the Depot. On the second shot, I drilled 10 1/4" holes around the top of my new bin, eight in the lid and 20 around the bottom.

I scattered my worms on a bed of newspaper in this bin, along with moist soil from Seaside Garden Center.

That first bin with holes goes on top of two bricks at the bottom of the bin without holes. Stacking them allows the excess water to drain from the top bin, preventing stink. Another thin layer of wet newspaper helps cool the worms and discourage flies. The worms need time to get comfortable in their surroundings before their first feed.

IT TAKES A COMMUNITY TO BREAK DOWN OUR FOOD.”

Use this week to gather your food waste. I place scraps in the Tupperware container in the freezer, and add them to the worm bin about once a week. Monitor the time it takes worms to eat their first serving and adjust accordingly; too much food will rot and cause the bin to smell. According to Worm Farming Secrets.com, worm populations will double in three months, allowing them to process more food.

They enjoy a variety of scraps, like vegetable cuttings and fruit, bread, grains, paper towels – “They love burrowing through avocado skins and banana peels,” Herring says – but avoid meat, dairy and citrus rinds, which contain toxic-to-worms limonene.

Herring says it’s important to rotate the food placement: “Imagine your bin is divided into six different sections; bury your waste in the next section every week.”

Moisture is also crucial. Too dry and the bin will attract ants, too wet and it’ll stink. If the soil feels dry, add a little water. If it’s too wet, add fiber, like dried leaves or untreated saw dust.

By now it’s been a month since I began composting. My roommate and I stick our heads inside the bin and take a deep breath. No hint of rotting food, no flies – just good, moist, fresh earth. The dog smells much worse.

Also in my bin is an assortment of organisms, like pot worms, little white worms and mites. Herring says it’s a sign of health: “Just as it takes a community to grow our food, it takes a community to break down our food.”

The next challenge: A compost bin for the *Weekly*. We buy a bin from MRWMD and a “compost keeper” at Target for \$20. The staff transitioned smoothly to directing banana peels and tea bags to the steel can instead of trash.

To complete the compost cycle at home and at work, we harvest the worm castings and, after shaking out the worms, spread the life-boosting nutrients on my potted plants and the *Weekly*’s gardens, respectively.

Best of all, my bin nearly takes care of itself. Once or twice a week, I feed my little friends. It takes a few minutes. Also encouraging is the interest both roommates have taken. We are now the proud caretakers of Kevin, Sally, Jesse, Raphael, Leonardo, Donatello, Michaelangelo, Captain Planet, the five Planeteers and many more. We can’t quite tell them apart, but we can tell that our life now makes a lighter impact.

Learn more about upcoming compost workshops at www.mrwmd.org