

Worms~ The Super Composters!!

By Annie Mollock, Gallatin Empire Garden Club

Earthworms are some of the hardest workers in your garden. They are voracious eaters of organic materials and leave rich manure castings in their wake as they work their way through the soil, cycling nutrients between the soil surface and as deep as six feet below. In addition to producing up to half of their body weight in nutrient rich castings every day, they also improve garden soils by creating channels which help to aerate the soil and improve drainage. Their slimy secretions help to bind soil particles and increase moisture retention. If your gardens have a healthy earthworm population they will be nutrient rich and easy to work in.

To have a healthy earthworm population in your garden they need an ample supply of organic matter, adequate moisture and oxygen. Adding compost, well rotted manure, shredded leaves, grass clippings and other organic materials will encourage worm activity. However, soils that have been severely depleted or heavily treated with chemical fertilizers and /or pesticides may take many years to build a healthy population. If your garden doesn't seem to have a lot of earthworms already, see if one of your fellow gardeners will give you a can of worms from their garden for "breeding stock".

Another beneficial and popular worm is the red wiggler worm used for composting kitchen scraps, shredded newspaper, coffee grounds and filters, teabags, aged manure and other organic material in a process called vermin-composting. They can consume up to half of their body weight every day and can double their population in as little as three months. They can survive at temperatures from around 50-90 degrees but 70 degrees is the best, so in Montana year-round vermin-composting is an indoor activity. You can do this at home by making your own worm bin. A well maintained worm bin has little or no odor. You can have a small bin in your pantry or cellar year round. To have a pest and odor free bin, feed the worms only what they can eat and keep the surface of the bin covered with wet burlap or other material. For more information on vermin-composting and worm bins there is a good website on the Internet at www.mastercomposting.com

Earthworms are poorly suited for vermin-composting and red wiggler worms are poorly suited for life in the garden in Montana, but each is valuable, highly organized and proficient at their designated jobs. So, whether in your garden or in a worm bin, put these little creatures to work for a healthier garden and thus a healthier planet. We will all reap the rewards!!

Resources: The Cutting Edge- Scott Viann; Master Composter.com; Wikipedia - Worms