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VT Worm Capital?



Kurt Reichelt reads his worms and vermicastings for the harvester, which separates the worms from the nutrient rich castings. Smith photo

by Mickey Smith

Red worms, or as they are more commonly called, red wigglers – were dubbed the Cadillac of worms on the late '70s hit TV show WKRP in Cincinnati and nowadays they have proven themselves better than your average fishworm with their high speed effectiveness in composting.

These high performance worms, with their sleek bodies have long been found in dung or leaf piles, but are now catching on as honored guests in your compost pile. And, while you can't buy a new Cadillac locally, there are at least two places you can find red wigglers!

Kurt Reichelt and Melissa Jordan, with their two businesses, both raise and sell annelids (segmented worms) whose main jobs are eating your organic waste.

Red worms are surface dwellers living close to the ground, unlike garden worms who live at the mid-level or nightcrawlers who burrow much deeper down.

Their operations vary in size and style but the end result is the same – worms for people who want to get into composting on their own, as well as worm-manufactured compost, called vermicastings, for those without the ability to manage or find a place their own operation.

Vermicasting is made from the waste from the worms as they "worm" their way through the organic material in their bin. The enzymes add nutrients to the waste, making vermicastings rich in humic acids and microbial activity, which is great for plant growth and germination. A red worm eats about half its weight each day and the amount of worms will double in mass in 60 to 90 days. Although this rate of growth and reproduction will slow if they run out of space and food.

Kurt's Green Mountain Soil is



Red Wigglers, from Green Mountain Soil, ready to be packaged. Lamoille County may be the Worm Capital of Vermont as it is currently home to two worm businesses. Smith photo

described as the leading supplier of red worms and castings in the Vermont. He operates out of the Storage Coops on Cadys Falls Road in Morrisville. Originally worm composting began as a science project with his four-year old son, but the experiment expanded into a home business before outgrowing that space. His operation now consists of a row of bins where the worms live, eating mostly horse manure and food waste. Kurt said the worms can basically eat anything that was at one time living, although he doesn't recommend meat because of the smell associated with the putrefaction process. The material is heated to



Worms to the left organic matter to the right, science and gravity helps this occur. Smith photo

131 degrees for 72 hours before being added to the worm beds. He explained this kills whatever is in there, such as harmful germs to seeds which might start growing in the worm bed. He set up an insulated room, which allows the worms to stay above freezing throughout the winter.

He said the space has been perfect except for one small issue tun-

neling its way into his operation. Moles, it seems, love red worms and can eat their fill. To combat this problem, Kurt called in a mercenary warrior – he adopted a barn cat to live in the storage unit. Fluffy, who stays pretty scarce when people around, has proven to be an excellent addition. Kurt said, since Fluffy's arrival, the mole tunnels have disappeared.

Once the red worms are ready for harvesting, Kurt uses a rotating cylindrical wire screen to separate the worms from the castings. With one-eighth of an inch holes, the fine and smooth castings fall down through the screen. Centrifugal force causes the larger material, including uneaten compost and the worms to fall out the end of the long cylinder. As it falls out of the end, the lighter material separates from the heavier worms. For the final step, Kurt goes back to his worm harvesting roots and uses a light table to separate the worms from any remaining material. Since they don't like the heat from the light, they will burrow lower to escape it. After a few minutes he removes the top layer of material, and repeats, until he is left with a pile of worms, a pound of which will include about 1,000 worms.

His worms are sold locally and beyond. He said in cities composting worms help people have their

own in-apartment composting bin in places where a full-sized bin might not be practical. His vermicastings are sold locally through How's It Growing? a new organic nursery in Johnson, and Evergreen Gardens, in Waterbury and also on the internet.

Just a few miles down the road, just off Route 100, Melissa Jordan has a home operation squeezed into her basement. Her worm-castings are sold at Guy's



Melissa Jordan and her collection bin, where the composting process begins. Smith photo

provide insulation. She said it is possible to create an insulated box that can be opened in winter, but at least for now she said her bins will be closed up when the weather turns cold and not opened until spring.

Melissa said corrugated cardboard is a very popular source of food, as the worms are able to crawl into the ribs and have a readily available source of food. She said paper products are good, but should be covered with

molasses or something similar to make it more interesting. Egg shells are also good, she said, because they need to grit to help "chew" their food (just like chickens do) and they use the membrane to help make their egg pouches.

While their operations are different, both agreed it is a great way to take care of food waste and make composting material for your garden. Both also said the best thing to do when your amount of composting worms grows to big for your needs is to pass some of those worms on to your friends so they, too, can drive the Cadillac of worms.

Now, that's home improvement from the ground up!

Visit the websites of these businesses at www.greenmountainsoil.com and www.wormpost.com.

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