



## CROW WING COUNTY MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

# Ask the Master Gardener

### APRIL 2017 COLUMN

Dear Master Gardener:

**I have heard about indoor composting with worms, what is this and how do I get started?**

Worm composting is using worms to recycle food scraps and other organic material into a valuable soil amendment called vermicompost, or worm compost. Worms eat food scraps, which become compost as they pass through the worm's body. Compost exits the worm through its tail end. This compost can then be used to grow plants. To understand why vermicompost is good for plants, remember that the worms are eating nutrient-rich fruit and vegetable scraps, and turning them into nutrient-rich compost.

First, you will need worms. By far, the most common variety of composting worm is *Eisenia fetida* – also known as the red worm or red wiggler. If you are looking to start up your own worm composting bin this is definitely the worm for you. So where does one get a hold of some of these worms? The easiest way is to simply buy them. There are a wide variety of online merchants who will sell them to you. Another option is to track down someone else with a worm bin and ask them to share.

Next, acquire a bin. Reuse an old dresser drawer or fish tank, build a box out of wood, or find or buy a plastic bin. The approximate size is 16" x 24" x 8" or ten gallons. Make sure the bin is clean by rinsing it with tap water to remove any residue that may be harmful to the worms. For wooden bins, line the bottom and sides with plastic (an old shower curtain or plastic garbage bag works well).

Once you have worms and a bin, follow these six easy steps from Cornell University to set up a worm bin.

1. Using about 50 pages, tear newspaper into 1/2" to 1" strips. Avoid using colored print, which may be toxic to the worms.
2. Place newspaper strips into a large plastic garbage bag or container. Add water until bedding feels like a damp sponge, moist but not dripping. Add dry strips if it gets too wet.
3. Add the strips to the bin; making sure bedding is fluffy (not packed down) to provide air for the worms. Bin should be 3/4 full of wet newspaper strips.
4. Sprinkle 2-4 cups of soil in bin, which introduces beneficial microorganisms. Gritty soil particles also aids the worms' digestive process. Potting soil, or soil from outdoors is fine.
5. Add the worms. Before adding the worms, find out how many worms you are starting with. The easiest method is to weigh the worms. If you do not have access to a scale, determine the worms' volume. The amount of worms is important for knowing how much food to feed them and for record keeping.

6. Bury food scraps under bedding. Feed the worms fruit and vegetable scraps that would normally be thrown away, such as peels, rinds, cores, etc. Limit the amount of citrus fruits that you place in the bin. NO MEATS, BONES, OILS OR DAIRY PRODUCTS.
7. Cover and choose a spot for the bin. Cover the bin with a lid made of plastic, plywood or cloth, but leave the lid ajar so the bin receives some air. If desired, you may drill holes into the bin. Place the bin away from windows and heaters.

FEED, WATER and FLUFF!!! To keep worms happy, feed them about once a week. If bedding dries up, spray with water. If bedding gets too wet, add dry newspaper strips. Fluff up bedding once a week so the worms get enough air.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**I would like to plant asparagus. What do I need to know to grow them?**

Asparagus is a perennial plant that comes back every year and one of the earliest producing vegetables in the spring. There are both female and male plants. As a general rule, female plants produce larger spears and male plants produce larger amounts of smaller diameter, more uniform spears. Most of the newer hybrids are all male plants.

Choose your planting spot carefully, as a bed of asparagus can last at least 15 years. Plant them in a fertile, sunny, well-drained site with good moisture. Medium-textured sandy loam to loam soils will usually produce the highest yields. Asparagus plants have a deep root system that can go down at least six feet, so avoid planting them in shallow soils or those with wet soil conditions. They grow best in a soil with a pH of 6.5-7.0, so it would be a good idea to get your soil tested to see if you need to amend it..

Most people plant asparagus from purchased crowns because it is easier and you get a crop one year earlier than if you plant them from seed. Try to purchase crowns that are one year old. Plant them with the crown buds upward in a trench or furrow about 12-18 inches apart and 6-8 inches deep; then immediately cover them with 2-3 inches of soil to keep them from drying out. Continue to add soil as the shoots emerge until the furrow is filled by the end of the first growing season. Asparagus crowns will continue to enlarge both vertically and horizontally over several years so planting at the appropriate depth is critical. It takes three years to develop a large root system and maximum fern growth to support future spear production. Because we have sandy soils in this area, it is important to make sure your plants have adequate soil moisture. Inadequate soil moisture during fern development can cause significant reduction in the next spring's spear production and negatively affect quality and yield.

To harvest asparagus, leave the old ferns until spring before chopping or mowing them. After spears appear, harvest when they are 6-8 inches long. Snap spears off at the soil surface. DO NOT cut the spears because of the danger of damaging neighboring spears that have not yet emerged. Allow spears remaining after July 1 to develop into ferns.

In the past, the most common varieties have been from the Washington series (Mary, Martha, and Waltham). Several of the all-male hybrids developed at Rutgers University have been shown to have higher yields and increased rust resistance and tolerance to fusarium crown rot and are often the preferred choice. 'Jersey Giant', 'Jersey Knight', and 'Jersey Prince' have done well in Minnesota. Other varieties released from the Jersey series with excellent resistance to fusarium include 'Jersey Jewel',

'Jersey King' (green spears with purple bracts), 'Jersey General', and 'Jersey Titan' (green spears with purple bracts). These have not been tested in Minnesota but have been reported to do well in Michigan and Canada. A newer all male hybrid released from the University of Guelph called 'Guelph Millenium' has performed very well in Canada but has not been evaluated in Minnesota. An open-pollinated variety that has been grown for years in Minnesota is Viking KB-3; although many of the Jersey hybrids offer better results. With that said, the Jersey hybrids have had winter kill at temperatures of -30°F with no snow cover.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**I would like to plant some maple trees to get my own maple syrup. Which ones should I plant and how big do they get?**

There are four species used for producing maple syrup: *Acer saccharum* (sugar maple, hard maple); *Acer rubrum* (red maple); *Acer saccharinum* (silver maple); *Acer negundo* (boxelder, Manitoba maple). All four are native to Minnesota. Plant them in full sun to part shade.

Most maple syrup is made from sugar maple sap. Sugar maple sap is preferred for making maple syrup because it has an average sugar content of two percent. Because sap from other maple species is usually lower in sugar content, approximately twice as much is needed to yield the same amount of finished syrup. If processed carefully, the resulting syrup from any of the maples described will have good flavor. Ornamental maples, such as the Norway and Schwedler maple, have a milky sap and cannot be used for syrup production.

*Acer saccharum* (sugar maple) is a beautiful, majestic tree that reaches a mature height of 75-100 feet and width of 50-75 feet. *Acer rubrum* (red maple, soft maple) reaches a mature height of 40-100 feet and width of 15-75 feet depending on the cultivar. The following cultivars of *Acer Rubrum* are hardy to our zone 3 temperatures ('Autumn Spire', Northfire®, 'Northwood', and Scarlet Jewell™). *Acer saccharinum* (silver maple) is a fast growing tree reaching a mature height and width of 75-100 feet. Use of silver maple in landscapes should be restricted to areas away from structures where a native species is needed for a naturalizing effect, where a shade tree with a rapid growth rate is needed, or where other shade tree species will not thrive due to dry, wet, or compacted soils. The root systems of silver maples grow vigorously and superficially and can penetrate drain tile and sewer lines, raise or buckle sidewalks, and make mowing difficult. *Acer negundo* (boxelder, Manitoba maple) reaches a mature height and width of 35-60 feet.

**April Garden Tips**

- As soon as the soil is no longer soft and muddy underfoot, sow lawn grass seed to fill in bare spots or areas where a little thickening up of the lawn is needed.
- Fertilize your lawn to keep it growing vigorously enough to help keep weeds out.
- If you've seen crabgrass appear early in warmer parts of your landscape (by sidewalks, driveways or south-facing slopes) in the past, apply a pre-emergent herbicide towards the end of the month. Whether using a traditional product or corn gluten meal, you must water the lawn lightly afterwards to activate the herbicide's ability to stop weeds as they sprout.
- Plant pansies, violas, and Johnny jump-ups late this month or early May to enjoy them as soon as possible and for the longest time. They thrive in cool weather, and will even withstand light frosts, though cold temperature may result in temporarily purplish foliage. Dead-head faded flowers to promote best blooming.

- Ignore daffodils, tulips, and other early perennials that are bowed down after a heavy spring snowfall. As the snow melts they usually reorient and begin to grow more upright again on their own. The snow is not cold enough to damage the plants. It actually protects the foliage from colder air temperatures.
- Wait to prune out winter burned sections of arborvitae until new growth begins to expand-it might mask the browned foliage. Junipers, yews, pine and spruce also put on new growth at the tips of the branches later in spring.

University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardeners are trained and certified volunteers for the University of Minnesota Extension Service. All information given in this column is based on university research. To ask a question, call the Master Gardener Help Line at 218-454-GROW (4769) and leave a recorded message. A Master Gardener will return your call.

