

The Best of Composts

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The world's work force is increasing by billions every year. The workers are worms, and their abilities are avidly sought by commercial as well as private producers and users of a product called vermicompost.

Earthworm manure, called castings, is the most valuable of all composts. The digestive system of the earthworm enriches all that passes through it, and vermicompost contains concentrated nutrients plus an amazing array of growth-promoting, disease suppressing and soil-aggregating compounds.

Vermicomposting is entering the mainstream of agriculture as well as horticulture. Its use is being urged by farm publications such as *Growing for Market*, which reports that vermicompost is being produced across the country; one operation in California is vermicomposting over 300 tons a day on 70 acres, Commercial supplies are increasing manifold each year. Many gardeners, of course, make their own, using readymade vermicompost bins or making their own as described in Mary Appelhof's "Worms Eat my Garbage".

A recent summary of tests stated that "In plant growth trials with vegetables, fruits and ornamental plants, vermicompost out performed both traditional compost and commercial plant growth substrates in almost every experiment." Ohio State University's extensive experiments have shown that adding 10% to 20% by volume of vermicompost to potting media improves seed germination and seedling growth and continues to enhance growth beyond the seedling stage.

In the garden, vermicompost can be mixed into the soil whenever planting. In making beds, spreading a layer of castings and topping this with regular compost, then an organic mulch, is one of the most effective ways of improving soil structure and fertility and quickly boosting its biological life.