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Red Worm Farming

Text and photos by Al Cornell

For Dan Corbin, it was a prayer and a pound of worms. After two years of retirement, he was seeking a way to be productive. He prayed. He determined to devote a portion of any monetary return to be-nevolent and spiritual works.



The small red worms pictured above are ideal for composting organic matter.

MY CO-OP

He says, “And then my thoughts kept turning to a pound of worms. Finally, I searched ‘worms’ on the web and decided to order a pound of red composting worms from Georgia. They arrived on December 5, 2003. I found the box of worms hanging on the mailbox in minus 10 degrees windchill.”

Gradually, that pound of worms multiplied into a volume that needed more space than Dan and Shirley’s basement could provide. Dan partnered with Ed Uhlenhake and took the worms to Ed’s farm. After two years, they had sufficient composting red wigglers to start marketing them.

Only a small fraction of their worms end up as bait for blue-gills, as their primary usage is for composting. Dan was elated to get involved in an endeavor that presented a positive environmental element. Composting organic waste keeps that material out of our landfills. Those worm castings compose excellent organic soil for adding to gardens, lawns, or fields.

Dan and I wound our way under REC lines to Ed’s farm. Ed was busily finishing the roundup



Ed Uhlenhake and Dan Corbin are farmers of “Wisconsin Red Worms and Red Wigglers.”

of a neighbor’s cattle that had gotten into his cornfield. He quickly got control of that episode and began to reveal his enthusiasm for the worm business.

Elongated innocent-looking piles of mostly worm castings and a mixture of horse and cow manure line the fences near a shed. Ed flipped some surface material over to expose worms busily feeding. He said, “Horse manure is the preferred food of these red worms.”

Dan’s first piece of advice for raising worms is to not over water. He follows that with, “Feed them one batch of organic

material and wait until they eat that before adding more.” If one continues to add more food, the acidity increases and the pH drops below the desired range of 5 to 6.

When mature worms become abundant in the mounds, they are forked onto the sorting machine. That machine originally sorted grain from chaff. Now it drops the castings to the ground and starts the concentration of worms in the remaining material.

As a result, the worms are still incorporated in duff and course



Above: Dan and Ed stand in front of the machine that separates worms from their castings. Right: Here the worms are becoming concentrated after most of the duff has been removed.



material. This conglomerate is spread on the concrete. Being negatively phototrophic, the worms retreat into the pile to escape the light. Then more of the material is scraped from the surface of the pile to further concentrate those red wigglers. Later, that process is repeated on a table in Dan's backyard until he has a solid mass of worms.

But let's consider the process and a few of the challenges that occur back at Ed's farm in raising those worms. They become semi dormant in winter. An old concrete feeder was used for over-wintering the worms. Warm water was cycled under the material to keep the worms from freezing.

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Then after a heavy December snowfall, the shed collapsed and there was no way to heat the worms. The next spring the worms were fine. They remain near the edge of the freezing zone on the organic matter and don't require added heat. Now, skid steer buckets of worms within their organic food source are piled on the floor next to that concrete feeder with no heat added.

In April, the worms are returned to the outdoors. As the springtime temperature rises to above 50 degrees, the eggs that over-wintered begin to hatch, and adult worms become very active in feeding and reproducing.

Ed's seven horses and 20-some head of beef cattle contribute towards the food supply. Winter manure is stored to use for summer food. Ed has also gotten manure from a local dairy; however, most of the dairies have gone to liquid manure storage, and it's harder to find the organic material needed for the worms. He located a supply of decomposing pumpkins last year that worked well for winter food but hopes to use the more abundant corn stalks this winter.

Another problem has occurred when raccoons determine

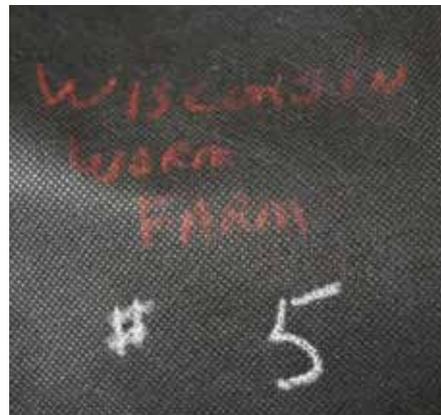
that they can come and dine on concentrated red worms. One year over 20 raccoons had to be removed from the area of the worm piles.

Now let's return to Dan and his solid mass of worms. To make sales, Dan had help from a neighbor to set up a website. Check that out by Googling "Wisconsin Red Worms and Red Wigglers." That site along with other postings online helped to establish a market for the worms.

Many customers are one-time buyers who put a worm box under the sink or in the basement. They feed the worms table scraps, waste paper, lawn clippings, leaf litter, and other organic material. Some buyers retail the worms, and a few municipalities buy worms and establish a composting area for organic waste at their waste disposal sites. The worms turn the waste into the fertile castings that can be sold for soil enhancement.

Orders range from one to a hundred pounds. One pound sells for \$36, and orders over 25 pounds sell for \$17 per pound. Dan weighs out the mass of worms, adds a quarter pound of sphagnum moss per pound of worms, packages them in breathable bags, boxes them, and ships them by mail or courier.

The original plan was to raise them for 10 years, but, after 14 years, Ed and Dan are still at it. They talk about continuing to supply worms for a couple more years. If you decide to order a pound, you will likely end up with an endless supply from which you can pilfer a few for catching bluegills. 🐟



Above: The little yellow worm eggs begin hatching when the spring temperature reaches 50 degrees.
Left: A breathable bag will be filled with five pounds of worms and 1.25 pounds of sphagnum moss for shipping.



Beneath the surface of these piles, organic matter is being converted to worms and their casting.





REMEMBERING MORTY

His real name was Mortimer Oliphant, but the kids called him

Morty Elephant. Morty was no one to correct you when you mispronounced his name. He had such a speech impediment that you couldn't gather if he was pronouncing his name like he wanted you to or he was telling you something about the weather. Most people didn't try to figure out what he was saying. But Pa did. Pa tried to understand him and did pretty well, better than most people in our community.

Morty lived alone on a sandy, hilly 80-acre farm about two miles from our farm. He barely grew enough crops to feed his handful of skinny Guernsey cows. He had never taken much to conveniences such as tractors or electricity. Morty had little contact with people, except when he drove his old '28 Chevrolet to town for groceries.

Pa would drive down to see Morty ever so often because he knew Morty never got to talk to anybody, and besides he might be sick or hurt and not able to take care of himself. It was a cool day in October when Pa asked if I'd like to ride along and check on Morty. I was probably five or six years old at the time. I had only heard about Morty, I had never seen him. Morty's house was best named a cabin because it was only one story and had but two or three rooms. A rusty stovepipe stuck out of the roof and a trail of wood smoke lazied off toward the barn. Pa stopped our 1936 Plymouth near the kitchen door, which eased open and a gray-haired, skinny old man, wearing faded bib overalls and a flannel shirt with holes in the elbows, squinted out toward us.

"At you, Hoirm?" Morty asked.

"How are ya, Morty?" Pa asked by way of greeting.

Morty said something in response that I couldn't

understand as he beckoned us to come inside. We sat by the kitchen table, Pa and Morty talking. Pa seemed to understand what Morty was saying, but I couldn't make head nor tail of his words. Then I heard Pa say, "I'll bet Jerry would like to see what you've got in that box back of your woodstove." I immediately perked up, wondering what was behind the stove.

Morty made a clucking sound with his mouth, and from behind the stove appeared a full grown raccoon. The animal waddled across the wooden kitchen floor and stopped in front of Morty's chair. Morty took a unshelled peanut from his pocket and handed it to the raccoon that sat holding up its little paws. The animal then shelled the peanut and put the peanut in its mouth.

And, then Morty and the raccoon began talking to each other. I couldn't understand either of them, but they were surely talking. Now so many years later, I realize that Morty, although he had great difficulty talking to people, clearly was able to talk with animals. The raccoon was his housemate and friend. (Based on a story in *When Chores Were Done*, Fulcrum Press, 2018.)



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