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"Cadillac of worms" rules as an urban composter

By Sanjay Bhatt
Seattle Times staff reporter

Meet the new goldfish for urban hipsters.

From Belltown to Capitol Hill, condo and apartment residents are making room for the red wiggler, a slender worm that eats half its weight each day and produces prodigious clumps of poop ("castings") — perfect for enriching pots of tomatoes, strawberries or just about anything else.

The wiggler is, er, gaining ground in Seattle lofts, balconies and even office kitchens as urban dwellers with green thumbs but no yards face increasingly long waits for a plot in a city P-Patch.

These balcony gardeners are joining a grow-your-own-food movement fueled by record food prices, food-safety scares and even the reality of climate change. The worms feast on table scraps that otherwise would end up in a landfill, where they decompose and emit a potent greenhouse gas.

"We're all trying to do our part, and local food is a big part of it," says Laura Niemi, who manages the gardening program at the nonprofit Seattle Tilth, an organic-gardening organization.

The rise of the red wiggler to the heights of urban living isn't happening just in Seattle. Gardeners in nearby cities such as Issaquah and Renton are buying them, as they are in eco-friendly cities including Portland, San Francisco and Austin, Texas.

Samantha Mastridge, who lives in an apartment in Seattle's Eastlake neighborhood and has a food garden on her balcony, learned about worm composting from farmers markets and Seattle Tilth.

"It was a long process to get to the point of getting a worm



CHRIS JOSEPH TAYLOR / THE SEATTLE TIMES
The red wiggler, formally the *Eisenia fetida*, is the vulture of the worm family, thriving in manure, rotting vegetation and compost.



CHRIS JOSEPH TAYLOR / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Liz Dunigan, an interior designer at Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Architects, places a worm-composting bin in the company's kitchen area after placing coffee grounds and other remains inside.



CHRIS JOSEPH TAYLOR / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Seiko Kusachi drills air vents into a composting bin during a worm-composting class at Steinbrueck Park in Seattle.

bin," Mastridge says. "I wanted to make sure I knew what I was getting into."

The worm is also making its way into the workplace.

For the past year, the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma has fed its campus kitchen scraps to the red wiggler, which digests the scraps and excretes a rich black fertilizer that then can be added to soil for growing flowers and food.

Workers at Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Architects in downtown Seattle have two worm bins in their office kitchen, right next to a vending machine stocked with chips and soda. That's thanks to the efforts of Liz Dunigan, a Belltown resident and interior designer who is the "chief worm composter" at the firm.

She admits, "There are a lot of people who are a bit squeamish about worms."

The Cadillac of worms

The red wiggler, known formally as *Eisenia fetida*, is the vulture of the worm family, thriving in manure, rotting vegetation and compost.

Worm-farm managers and trained composters say the red wiggler is "the Cadillac of worms" because it produces the highest-quality fertilizer.

"They're voracious eaters. They'll double in population every 60 days," says Kelan Moynagh, co-owner of Yelm Worm Farm in Thurston County.

The 1990s were salad days for the red wiggler in Seattle, as the city turned to worm composting as one solution to a crisis over where to send city garbage. Food scraps then and now account for about a quarter of the average household's garbage.

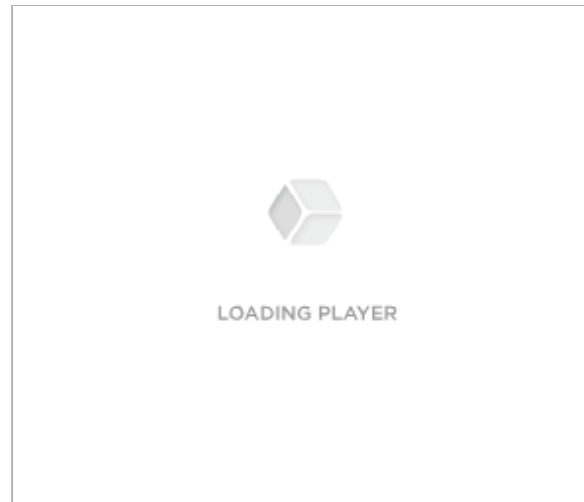
In 1994, the Kingdome began recycling salad scraps through worm composting, using the fertilizer on the stadium's flower beds. From 1993 to 2003, the city of Seattle sold more than 22,000 "Green Cone" composting bins to residents with yards, says Carl Woestwin, landscape conservation manager at Seattle Public Utilities. The containers, which are still for sale, attract wigglers and keep out rats.

But the romance with the red wiggler ebbed as curbside collection of yard waste and food scraps became widely available. Waste-reduction specialists are skeptical that worm bins will ever be common in households.

"I love that image, but there's not that many people doing it," Woestwin says.

Return of the red wiggler

Try telling that to the folks at Seattle Tilth.



Putting the wiggler to work

Scientific name: *Eisenia fetida*, a species of earthworm.

Food: The worms eat vegetable and fruit scraps, coffee grounds, tea leaves and eggshells. Avoid feeding them dairy, meat, fish, bones, oils and pet wastes because the worms will emit bad odors.

Bedding: In a bin, place the worms atop a bed of shredded newspaper, used paper napkins, wood shavings or cardboard strips.

Issues: Mismanagement of the worm bin can lead to odors, fruit flies or worms trying to escape.

Dwellings: The worms prefers moist, dark environments with good air circulation and tend to stay inside bins rather than explore.

Worm bins: A homemade bin costs about \$40 for materials and \$25 for a half-pound of wigglers. For details, contact Seattle Tilth at 206-633-0224 or go to www.seattletilth.org.

Source: Seattle Tilth

In response to demand, the Wallingford nonprofit is offering 18 classes this year on container gardening and worm composting, up from three in 2006.

Tilth gets about 20 worm orders a week, but has occasionally hit 40. Yelm Worm Farm says its red-wiggler sales to the Puget Sound area have doubled since 2006.

More women than men attend the worm-composting classes, at least those offered in Seattle and Portland. Nobody's sure why, but theories abound — it's a way to meet guys, a greater concern for healthy living or a maternal impulse for their children's future.

"The most common thing I hear is they feel they missed out," explains Jessica Heiman, who talks to moms at Seattle Tilth's children's programs. "I think there's a hunger for this knowledge that was skipped over in the last generation."

King County waste experts decided last year that worm-composting systems in schools and businesses weren't worth the cost and potential downside of bad odors and flies. Enthusiasts, however, say a homemade worm bin can cost as little as \$40 and is easy to manage if owners pay attention to the wigglers' needs, especially moisture, air circulation and drainage of "worm juice."

"I think that singing to your worms can definitely help," says Carey Thornton, who has two worm bins in her West Seattle studio apartment. To keep up with the worms' bedding needs, she confesses she has taken extra copies of a local weekly from the coffee shop. And "if I'm going on vacation for two months, then I might want to have someone baby-sit my worms."

Anisha Shankar, who works for an environmental consulting company that has a large worm bin in its downtown Seattle office, says that she and her husband did have a temporary problem with flies with the worm bins they had in their former apartment, but that it wasn't the worms' fault.

Seattle condo and apartment dwellers may grow weary of the red wiggler, though, as residents with yards did, once curb collection of food scraps becomes available widely in the next three years.

But some urban gardeners living high above terra firma are committed to sticking with their worms.

"When you don't have a yard, you do the best you can," says Wesa Anderson, 28, a Capitol Hill resident who, until a year ago, had a balcony garden of tomatoes, bell peppers, Thai red chili peppers, green beans, spinach, basil and rosemary.

Anderson plans to start a new garden after a trip abroad.

On her shopping list: a worm bin that fits under the kitchen sink.

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