

# Finding beauty in worm poop

Two men—a Trinidadian farmer and a Dominican vermiculture researcher—are making a thriving small business from farming earthworms and their nutritious wastes

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It's dark brown and looks like coffee grounds, or a rich, earthy compost. And it comes from worms: more specifically, their rear ends. Vermicompost is the digested waste of worms that have eaten their fill of organic scraps, and processed them into a rich, natural nutrient mix ideal for boosting soil quality for growing plants. Nestled in the green countryside of Gran Couva, there is an enterprising small business dedicated to producing just that substance. It is the Boissierre Greens Earthworm Farm, operated by landscaper/farmer Dexter Ragoonanan, and Micah Martin, an emerging soil, worm and vermicompost expert from UWI.

Vermicompost, or worm poop, improves soil structure, increases yield and can even improve the taste of fruit and vegetables. It's a natural fertiliser which contains five times more nitrogen, seven times more phosphorus and 11 times more potassium than ordinary soil, according to gardening writer Fred Bove in the US magazine *Modern Farmer*. You can even make your own "black gold" yourself without using any fancy chemicals. And unlike many artificial fertilisers, gardeners say it will not burn your plants.

The humble earthworm's rare ability to create value from waste matter is not widely known or appreciated in T&T. But worm farms have existed for decades in other countries—vermiculture happens now in Canada, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines and the USA on a large, industrial scale, with many specialised products and opportunities. In the Caribbean, Cuban farmers have long practiced it, and are regional experts in the field, growing their own worms and making their own compost for agriculture.

If the thought of raising hundreds of slimy pink wrigglers by yourself makes you squirm, however, then



From left, worm farmer Dexter Ragoonanan gives some compost tea to a pepper plant, while vermiculture researcher Micah Martin holds some vermicompost produced at Boissierre Greens Worm Farm in Gran Couva.

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Boissierre Greens can help. They are the leaders in vermicomposting in T&T. The business not only farms worms, but also makes bags of vermicompost ready for use, as well as a blend of liquid fertiliser extract (compost tea) and soil amendments to help grow healthy plants.

The two-man team also offers training in how to make your own vermicompost. They have even designed their own worm bin model to make it easy for the backyard gardener. The duo has reached out to schools, too—on June 6 they started distributing worm-farming units to schools to promote healthy organic farming through vermicomposting, as well as to encourage good waste management practices; the worms can eat most vegetable kitchen waste or plant-based matter, including old newspapers. The beauty of it is that they can help you recycle your waste while creating something useful at the end.

The Guardian visited Boissierre Greens Worm Farm in Gran Couva to find out more about the business. The Ragoonanan family farm is the headquarters for the worm farm, which exists in a roomy, dark covered area next to the family home. There, over 500,000 worms munch



Micah Martin holds some of the vermicompost in progress. Vermicompost, or worm poop, improves soil structure, increases crop yield and can even improve the taste of fruit and vegetables.

away happily in the dark, in big containers of well-prepared mixed organic matter.

But it wasn't all smooth sailing. At first, Dexter Ragoonanan tried importing a batch of "starter" worms from abroad. But by the

time they reached him, they were all dead. Then his wife, a wise woman, suggested he try local worms. So he collected 1,200 of them in one week of devoted worm hunting on his family farm land. He then put them in bins of earth to live, and

mixed in some "growing mash"—chicken feed—with organic matter which included horse manure. But less than two hours later, he discovered most of them had perished,

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