

Getting Our Hands Dirty
By Katherine Williams
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When architects start thinking about making their own offices more environmentally friendly, they consider several strategies. These include implementing office recycling programs, installing light fixtures that consume low amounts of power, installing occupancy sensors for light fixtures, recycling carpet and ceiling panels, using low VOC paint, and buying products made from recycled or rapidly renewable materials. However very few architects think about the food wastes that are generated by their offices and even fewer have considered using live creatures to get rid of that waste. Earlier this year, my firm, decided to experiment with ways to tackle just that.

For those of us that grew up around gardens and gardening, composting is nothing new. However, the practice of vermicomposting is unfamiliar to some, especially urban dwellers. Vermicomposting is the use of specially bred earthworms especially to aerate soil and convert organic matter into compost. Although, many people hear about vermiculture, and think it is gross, it is a naturally occurring process happening in our back yards. Most adults leave digging in the dirt to kids. Anyone can bring the process of composting inside.

Earlier this year, I set up a vermiculture bin in my A&E office of over 100 employees. My firm's director of Environmental Planning and Research, Bryna Dunn, and I had been discussing the idea of composting the firm's food waste for over a year. I was motivated to encourage the firm to begin a vermiculture project because it furthers our objectives of being a 'green' firm. A vermiculture bin is a great way to reduce waste by diverting food waste from landfills. It also allows us to produce our own compost. The discussion between the director and I started because we are currently renovating a building which will become the firm's new headquarters. I inquired about whether a composter was included as part of the project.

In considering the new office as a lab for testing ideas, we want to have the ability to recommend to our clients some of the products and equipment we are using. The first idea discussed was a large composter placed somewhere on the site. After looking at the site constraints and considering the financial cost of a composter, it was clear a large composter would not be part of the project. Early this year, I read an article and discovered that the California EPA has started a similar program in their office of 3000 employees with 100 bins throughout their offices. It was encouraging to see this type of project being implemented at another location and on such a large scale. A small vermicomposting bin was the chosen as the option that Bryna and I could present to the firm leadership and have a reasonable chance of them agreeing to allow the project to proceed.

Bryna and I presented idea of worm bin to our firm president. He was initially skeptical about idea but receptive to project. We knew if we could convince him it was good idea, then other people in the firm would at least be open to the idea. He had the same concerns

many people do when they first hear about it: they ask will it stink, will the worms be crawling through the office, and how do we maintain and monitor it?

We chose the small worm bin for several reasons. The small bin size can be placed in the kitchen or at employees' desks. We can actively monitor it. A small indoor bin also allows everyone in the office to see it and take an active part in the reduction of waste. This was a desire that our company president mentioned in our initial conversation.

I have learned in the last six months how to keep the worms in their preferred environmental conditions including monitoring the amount of food that goes into the bin and maintaining proper moisture and temperature levels. This was a risk because of all the things that could go wrong - including creating unwanted odors or having a gnat problem. It has become successful, I believe, and maybe we have changed a few people's minds who were initially disgusted by it. About three months ago, I sought help from several employees in the daily maintenance of the bin. Now, we have a team of people who take care of the worms. We have harvested the first batch of compost. We will now look back at the lessons learned and look into starting additional bins.

Employees were either a) excited or b) disgusted by the idea of having worms in the office. I have had several people be very enthusiastic about the worm bin and some are considering getting their own at home. I have received a range of comments in reaction to the project. One employee suggested a puppy could fulfill the same duty as our worms. I have gotten lots of references to fishing, inquiries about surplus worms being available, and suggestions of a company fishing trip. Our IT department was kind enough to post several shocking stories for us on the front page of our intranet on April Fool's Day. Of course my story was about giant worms eating part of our office. I have also been told that designers show the bin to vendors and consultant that come through the office. One comment that surprised me occurred when an employee told me that he admired the firm for doing it because anyone can replace carpet and lights, but a vermiculture bin is usually off the radar for most firms.

A vermiculture bin is a project that can easily be replicated in schools and other office environments and gives our clients (and employees) another example of a 'green' initiative they can implement.

Vermicomposting Resources:

<http://www.wormwoman.com/acatalog/index.html>

www.happydranch.com

<http://www.calepa.ca.gov/EPABldg/GreenFeature.htm>

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