

Monroe prison's worm composting program a national model



Mark Mulligan / The Herald

Washington State Reformatory inmate Robin Combs separates worms from drying soil that will be used to collect worm castings by the vermiculture program at the Monroe Correctional Complex on Thursday morning. The program uses worms to compost food waste from the facility, turning that waste into fertilizer that is distributed at the prison and in the city of Monroe.



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Washington State Reformatory inmate Ricky Curry grabs a handful of what once was food waste from the prison, but is now soil broken down by worms at the vermiculture program at the Monroe Correctional Complex on Thursday morning.



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Inmates at the Washington State Reformatory vermiculture program have taken on the red wiggler worm as their mascot.

<http://www.heraldnet.com/article/20140919/NEWS01/140918868>



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Tomatoes grown at the Washington State Reformatory in Monroe Thursday morning.



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Washington State Reformatory inmate Robin Combs watches as worm castings separate from larger chunks of soil.



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Washington State Reformatory inmate Nick Hacheney leads a tour of the vermiculture program at the Monroe Correctional Complex on Thursday morning.



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Flowers grow in a garden that also contains vegetables at the Washington State Reformatory in Monroe Thursday morning.



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A bin inside the vermiculture program at the Washington State Reformatory shows layers of composting material at the Monroe Correctional Complex on Thursday morning.



Mark Mulligan / The Herald

Washington State Reformatory inmate Christopher Hall separates worms from drying soil that will be used to collect worm castings by the vermiculture program at the Monroe Correctional Complex on Thursday morning.



Mark Mulligan / The Herald

Flowers grow in a garden that also contains vegetables at the Washington State Reformatory in Monroe on Thursday morning.

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MONROE — They've got time. And the inmates are using it to build a large-scale composting program at the Washington State Reformatory that is saving taxpayers money.

Now the program is attracting attention from other correctional institutions across the country. On Thursday, a dozen people from prisons and sustainability groups were allowed behind the razor wire and led through seven sliding metal gates to see Monroe's operation.

The worm composting, or vermiculture, program has cut the cost of disposing of the prison's kitchen waste while producing organic soil and fertilizer.

Art King, a corrections officer who retired last year, started the program in 2010 with 200 red wiggler worms. Now it's a commercial-sized operation that boasts some 6 million worms.

The worms consume up to 10,000 pounds of the prison's food waste each month. That cuts garbage disposal costs by more than \$7,800 a year, prison officials said.

As the worms consume the waste, they produce “castings,” a nutrient-rich natural fertilizer. The castings can be used directly on plants or mixed with soil as an organic potting mix.

They can also be diluted with water and aerated to produce “worm tea,” a liquid fertilizer. That can double as an organic pesticide, King said.

The program now produces more than 250 pounds of castings and about 1,200 gallons of worm tea each month. These products fertilize several acres of vegetables that help feed inmates at the prison, also saving the state money.

“There's no reason these guys can't grow all of their own produce. They could feed this whole valley,” King said. “It's not the inmates who won't do it. It's the administration.”

The program's growth is slowed by the bureaucracy and red tape that come with being a correctional institution, said Donna Simpson, who helped King start the operation. Still, the program has grown considerably in the past four years, she said.

King [envisions the operation saving taxpayers millions of dollars](#) by growing food, exporting worms and making products to send other state agencies. The city of Monroe is already using worm tea from the program instead of buying it.

The program costs the prison very little. It uses inmate labor and recycled materials. Laundry detergent containers were turned into worm breeding cases. The garden beds were made from old mattress cases. The compost bins, which retail for about \$5,000 each, were made from scrap wood and old food carts.

In addition to saving money, the program offers inmates a chance to develop skills.

“This is a job a guy can really expect to get on the outside,” said inmate Nick Hacheny.

Hacheny is a former Bainbridge Island [pastor serving time for killing his wife and setting his](#)

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[house on fire](#). In prison, he has been a leader in getting the worm composting program to take off, Simpson and King said.

Another inmate, Ricky Curry, recently passed up the chance to go to a lower-security lockup so he could continue to work with the worms. Curry is serving time for trafficking in stolen property and failure to register as a felony sex offender. He is preparing for his release, which is scheduled for February. He said he plans to use what he has learned to open a business when he gets out.

“I don't want to come back and do this again,” he said.

The inmates researched and wrote an [operations manual](#) for composting in a prison setting. Other institutions are now modeling Monroe's operation.

“They do it best in Washington state,” said Felicia Hinton, corrections director for the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services.

Hinton said she was gathering information because she plans to work with a university to implement a similar program at her institution.

Timothy Buchanan, warden at the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, said he came to Monroe to look at ways to save taxpayer dollars while teaching inmates more productive skills.

“Most of these guys do get out. And we want them to be better people when they do,” he said.

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