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Li'l livestock

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Red wiggler worms enjoy a diet of vegetables, coffee grounds, tea leaves and juicer pulp mixed with ground eggshells and layered with maple leaves. They're too fast to get more than four in a picture. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

When it comes to raising worms, I'll take Harstine Island over a heat island.

My first clutch of worms came from Brooklyn. I picked them up at a community garden and housed them in one of those long, low plastic bins you might keep your shoes in under the bed.

My neighborhood had no trees in the street boxes and little green space nearby. The upshot in the summertime was the most scathing heat that welled up from every surface and washed over everywhere except basements, where I slept amid my drying laundry imagining that the draft might give it a swamp-cooler function.

I tended the worms in my studio apartment, but took them out to the landing and opened the door to the roof when my apartment got too hot. Traveling to upstate New York for a summer weekend, I decided the landing was a safer place to leave them unattended. I returned to find them gone. It had been infernally hot and they had melted into their food.

The same thing happened this summer, in the late June heat wave. One worm highrise (a plastic stackable tower of trays with a spigot at the bottom to draw off worm tea) had been in the sun, and another was behind it. I lost the whole bunch in the most exposed highrise.

Those had been called the "Kims." Because worms are hermaphroditic, giving them a unisex name is fun. The "Ashleys" behind them were the sole survivors. When I have a moment I'll move some Ashleys into the Kims' old home and give them a new name.

The Ashleys had been a gift from Portland. Often the containerized worm ecology becomes too sprawling for its stewards: flies and gnats infest the worm food, and people can't stand the clouds of pests in their kitchens or on their remote-work Zoom meetings.

One way to handle this noisome invasion is with diatomaceous earth. Worms are unperturbed by it because of their mucosal secretions — the same is true of slugs and snails.

This rich form of silica made from the powdered skeletons of fossilized algae kills bugs by abrading through their exoskeletons and causing them to dehydrate. It also absorbs the protective wax on their

shells and interferes with their open circulatory systems.

A light dusting of it on the topmost layer of dry worm bedding (moisture dulls its effect) will require flies and gnats to wallow in it en route to the buffet. They'll become food for the worms before they're ready for dessert.

Worm castings are easy enough to buy, but their effects on your plants can be different based on feedstock. Ohio State University did a study on vermicast (finished worm castings) based on cattle manure, hog manure, food waste and paper waste.

Comparing growth, yields, pest repellency and disease resistance, it found the respective compositions of humic and fulvic acids, hormones and nutrients resulting from varying inputs affected plants differently. It's not so drastic as to fixate the home gardener, but agricultural operations growing particular crops might want to optimize their vermicast with specific diets for the worms.

A reader wrote in to tell me that he starts his own worm bins by putting them on the ground and letting earthworms colonize them. While this works fine, red wigglers are surface dwelling worms that do most of their work in a shallow soil horizon.

The earthworms that are naturalized to our soils bring nutrients up to 6 feet below the surface. I'd rather use worms that aggregate their castings where I can easily harvest them and leave the earthworms to work the soil under my compost bins.

Vermicast is finished sooner than compost, builds soil faster and plants absorb nutrients from it with greater ease. Given that the worms do the turning for you, it's also easier on your back!

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*