

Mary Appelhof

At about the time Mary Appelhof presents her workshop in Cardiff, Wales, in September 2002 she will have spent 30 years being inspired by, entertained by, educated by, and excited by worms. During all that time she's lived with them inside her home, quietly turning her food waste garbage into dark brown worm castings full of nutrients for house plants and garden.

Her vision at the time of the Stockholm Conference for the Human Environment (1972) was that "tons of worms could be eating tons of garbage." She thought it would be huge piles of garbage being consumed by huge masses of worms. But this biologist and former high school teacher didn't have the wherewithal to make that happen. So Mary did what she could. She started with a simple brochure, *Basement Worm Bins Produce Potting Soil and Reduce Garbage*, ©1973, produced on an ancient mimeograph machine she bought from the Democratic party for \$5. Mary talked to garden clubs, exhibited at harvest festivals, barter fairs, and energy expos. She was a lone voice for protecting the environment when she served on solid waste planning committees. This was before they even knew what composting was, to say nothing of vermicomposting. She gave workshops and lectures. She organized conferences. She helped knock-down a \$2 million dollar attempt to site a garbage-burning incinerator in SW Michigan.



Those thirty years have given Mary Appelhof enough time to learn how to publish a book considered to be a best-seller in the domain of independent publishers. Her 1982 manual on how to set up and maintain a worm composting system, *Worms Eat My Garbage* sold 100,000 copies before the 1997 revision which has sold over 45,000 more. As author, publicist, opener of the mail, packager and shipper of the first few thousand books, Mary had direct contact with people whose lives were changed by her book. Many asked her for specific suggestions on what they could do in the classroom to get kids involved in worm composting. So Mary collaborated with two co-authors over a two-year period to produce *Worms Eat Our Garbage: Classroom Activities for a Better Environment*. (Flower Press, 1993) One of the thousands of teachers who used both of Mary's books in her classroom did as all good students do. . . went above and beyond the master. Binet Payne of Laytonville, California, developed, with her students, a school-wide program for vermicomposting cafeteria wastes and recycling everything else recyclable. This program saves the school \$6000 a year in avoided dumpster fees in addition to providing the students with real-life learning as they maintain the worm bins and grow in the school gardens vegetables and flowers fertilized by vermicompost. As the most logical publisher around to publish Binet'Payne's book, Mary's Flower Press published *The Worm Cafe: Mid-scale vermicomposting of lunchroom wastes* in 1999.

To make worm composting more convenient for readers of her book Mary sells worms by the pound so her customers can get the proper type of worm (redworms, *Eisenia fetida*) without going to a dozen bait shops looking for them. She doesn't grow them any more. She says, "My work is processing information, networking, writing, communicating. I found a worm grower with whom I have established a

long-term relationship from whom I buy worms wholesale. I depend upon her; she depends upon me. We each do what we are good at and have a mutually beneficial relationship. That's what I think all business relationships should be—symbiotic relationships— in biological terms."

Mary also has a patent to her credit. She designed a worm bin called the Worm-a-way®. Made of recycled plastic, its unique ventilation system consists of perforated pipes extending from aeration holes in the bottom of the bin and large vents in the lid. She is committed to provide employment to people who have difficulty finding jobs otherwise, so her business contracts with Goodwill Industries to drill holes in the bins and pipes, as well as provide warehousing and pallet storage for books and bins. A sheltered workshop assembles the packets containing her book, garden fork, vents, and instructions which go into each of the bins.

Mary ventured into the domain of video production when she obtained a National Science Foundation grant to do videomicroscopy of live worms. With footage developed during that grant she produced the educational video, *Wormania!* which contains amazing footage of baby worms twisting and turning inside their cocoons, earthworms mating, and even, a baby worm hatching from its cocoon. In the video, Mary Appelhof assumes in living color her persona of Worm Woman, a name given to her by the organic gardening crowd back in the late 70's. She's been called that ever since, and probably forevermore, since her website is: <http://www.wormwoman.com>.

With two masters' degrees, one in biology, the other in education, Mary Appelhof straddles the domains of academia and the layperson. She recognized from the beginning that worm growers needed to become more knowledgeable about earthworm science if they were going to develop a viable industry. But she could see also that scientists wouldn't give worm growers the time of day if growers couldn't be bothered learning what kind of worm they were growing. After all, redworms could be red wigglers, or tiger worms, or brandling worms, or manure worms, depending on whom you were talking to and from what part of the country or the world. To the scientists, using *Eisenia fetida* at least gave a set of characteristics which could be discussed with a reasonable amount of certainty they were talking about the same species. So Mary organized two conferences bringing scientists and laypersons together to report and discuss research needs and technologies to develop the science and applications for vermiculture and vermicomposting, the first in 1980. The twentieth anniversary of that conference was the Vermillennium, held at Mary's home base in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in Fall 2000. This major international conference attracted 129 scientists and worm workers from 19 countries.

Mary Appelhof could not run her two businesses, Flowerfield Enterprises and its publishing arm, Flower Press, without the essential work done by her operations manager, Nancy Essex, who keeps everything running smoothly while Mary writes, talks, and travels.

Tons of worm eating tons of garbage? It's happening. Thousands of homes and classrooms, a pound of worms, a pound of garbage at a time. Decentralized, on-site garbage disposal. People taking responsibility for their own wastes. Colorful gardens. Healthy food. As long as the vision is there, the details can vary.

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