La. vermiculturist ‘worming’ his way into nursery sales

By DICK WRIGHT
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LAFAYETTE — Gerald Freeman is a vermiculturist. That is, he is a worm farmer. Since August 1993, Freeman and his family have been husbanding buckets of long, pinkish-gray nightcrawlers and harvesting their output, which can be considerable.

The output is called “castings.” Castings are earthworm manure. Worms eat, worms cast.

A sign on the front of the building that houses the earthworm business at 105 Board Street advertises “Wiggle Worm Soil Builder.”

Freeman said worm castings are a favorite fertilizer of organic growers — farmers and gardeners who shun man-made soil additives as unhealthy for the soil and the people who eat what is grown on the soil. Castings find a ready market among landscapers and nursery people, he said.

Calls to some of the retailers who sell the worm product found them pleased, although one retailer said it had not moved well in his place. Gust Catsulis of Iberia Gardens and Nursery, New Iberia, didn’t fault the product, but he said few customers asked for it and he ended up pricing his supply at cost to try to sell it. “It just hasn’t kicked in yet.”

However, John Chastant of Chastant Brothers, Lafayette, said, “It’s great. I’ve used it.” When he carried worm castings eight years ago, the product didn’t move, but Chastant said Freeman has got the product moving with customers now. A Chastant Brothers employee said customers got samples of the castings. “They liked it and they came back,” she said.

West Feed Mills & Farm Supply, West Monroe, carried Freeman’s product this year and will restock it next spring. “It moved and people liked it. It’s a really good product to start (plants) with,” a person at the business said.

Mary Billeaud of St. Anne St. Nursery, Carencro, said, “I am impressed with it. We use it in landscaping. I think it’s wonderful. It adds a richness to the soil. The plants seem to thrive.”

Loop Industries, the Freeman family business, sells everything that comes out of the earthworm bucket, including earthworm eggs.

“We actually have a number of products that come from raising worms,” Freeman said. “First of all, we sell fresh bait.”

Another sign on the front of the building advertises “Tasty Bait Crawler.”

It is almost a no-waste business. Freeman says he hasn’t found a use for the sacks the Illinois peat humus comes in. The peat — not the same as peat moss sold in plant nurseries — is what the worms live in and eat, along with some nutrition additions.

“The worm gives us fertilizer from what he eats. The fertilizer is organic,” no man-made additives, Freeman said.

“We also get a by-product, which is called earthworm castings. Castings are a favorite fertilizer of organic growers who shun man-made soil additives. Castings also come out of the earthworm bucket. The fertilizer is organic, no man-made additives,” Freeman said.

Gerald Freeman of Lafayette said worm castings are a favorite fertilizer of organic growers who shun man-made soil additives.

Gerald Freeman has his hands full of hard-working earthworms. Worms produce the Freeman family’s business product — earthworm castings.
worm farm residue,” he said.
The residue is the leftover peat the worms didn’t eat. Landscapers and nurseries use it as a soil conditioner, he said.

“It is not as rich as the fertilizer but it is very strong,” Freeman said.

Nurseries can use the incidental trash and pieces of clay in the peat to line the bottom of flower pots, he said.

People can buy earthworm eggs to “seed” their flower beds or compost piles, Freeman said. Worms aerate and work the soil. Eggs are washed out of the residue.

Earthworms are a serious business here at Loop Industries — not a hustle of the gullible as some worm-ratting come-ons appear to be.

Freeman, his wife Earline and son Timothy farm earthworms according to a system he said was carefully worked out over the years by Unco Industries, Racine, Wis.

Loop’s worms can produce 40,000 pounds of castings a month when the operation is going at full capacity, Freeman said.

Loop’s worm farming is a completely indoor business. White plastic buckets punctured by tiny holes hold a selected number of worms and the peat mixture. Worms like peace and darkness. They shun light, and vibrations make them nervous, Freeman said.

The worms are kept at a comfortable 72 degrees. Timothy Freeman keeps a careful gauge of the peat pH — the acid and alkaline balance — and moisture in each bucket. There is a warm cabinet for incubation of worms.

At full production, Loop Industries has worms making castings in 2,180 buckets.

Mature worms are “run” every 10 days, the smaller worms are run every 14 days. This is the harvest of castings. In this time, Freeman said, the worms have worked the medium they live in.

When it is time to gather castings, Timothy and sometimes a helper or Gerald himself dump the buckets of worms and peat on a screening machine. The screens separate the different products — waste, which is trash and lumps of clay in the peat; earthworm farm residue, and finally the little black grains of earthworm castings.

Once “run,” the double handful of wiggly, healthy worms goes back into a bucket of fresh medium.

“Earthworm castings are very heavy,” Freeman said. A gallon of castings weighs six pounds. One pail yields two gallons.

“The material is just fantastic. It has over 60 trace minerals,” he said.

Freeman is licensed to sell Unco’s system. A part-time operation takes 10 to 20 hours of work a week, but the operator can make $1,600 to $2,000 a month, he said.

The grower can sell the product, but Freeman said, “This is not a get-rich-quick scheme.”

“This is a business and it has to be treated like a business,” he said.

Loop Industries will expand, but slowly, Freeman said.

“We’re young. We’re still growing,” Freeman said. Loop is a wholesaler
to stores, nurseries and greenhouses. “Next year is going to be a banner year for us,” Freeman said.