“Hope” is the thing in the worm bin!
by Julia Macray

Prepping for Earth Day ribbon-cutting event

July 22nd marked the 3 month anniversary of our new industrial vermicomposting system at the UW Farm site at the Center for Urban Horticulture. A project over 5 years in the making is now coming to fruition, and the hopeful message of climate resilience that our on-site compost facility embodies could not be coming at a better time.

As the decision-making bodies for our nation stray further and further from enacting concrete climate policy and law, as wildfire season approaches, as we see the increasing decay of the ice sheets on our poles, as we learn daily of heat waves, droughts, and political turmoil spurred by the changing climate, it is easy to lose hope and feel powerless. I spend a lot of time in my classes learning about the end of the world as we know it - and I understand the demoralizing sentiment of feeling like a tiny cog in a great machine rolling towards the edge of a cliff. However, I also know that a machine is a sum of its parts, and as members of a society we *do* have a great deal of power to change the direction of our wider communities. Small, effective changes like the new vermicompost facility are a perfect example of actionable, achievable movements towards climate resilience.

The vermicompost facility on the farm is designed to handle all food waste from the farm sites, in addition to some (non-toxic, non-seedy) weeds, and any appropriate food waste from events at the Center for Urban Horticulture. Currently, we are feeding the worms all waste from the wash-pack at the CUH site (totaling as of this writing at about 350 pounds), in addition to waste from pizza bakes and other events. Our large population of red wiggler worms chomp down on the food waste, breaking it down, processing it, and inoculating it with beneficial bacteria from their guts. Waste products from the worms, known as castings, will be harvested to fertilize all three farm sites, as well as gardens around campus. At peak capacity (given sufficient input) the facility will be able to produce about 100 pounds of compost a week!

But how does this help the planet? By removing our farm sites from the industrial compost loop, we reduce emissions from trucking compost to and from Cedar Grove, and we also reduce our reliance on outside fertilizers. Vermicompost recycles nutrients directly back to our soils, promoting growth of beneficial bacteria and fungal networks. Additionally, we will help redirect food waste that may have ended up in landfills, producing methane and other greenhouse gasses.

Resident red wigglers diligently decomposing a head of lettuce

Helping lead the new vermicompost program on the farm has been one way I have been able to soothe some of the stresses and anxieties I feel about the future of our world, by knowing that I am helping make a small, but impactful, change and setting an example for others. I hope that everyone can find a project that elicits these same “your actions DO matter” feelings, whether it’s growing more food in your garden, making jam from local berries, volunteering for habitat restoration groups (or the UW Farm!), or even getting your hands on some worms and making your own backyard vermicompost!