

Tiny 'Plowmen' Make Improvements to Soil

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Special Writer for The Birmingham Eccentric

If "April showers bring May flowers", they also bring to light, momentarily, one of man's best friends, the lowly earthworm.

If you are walking along the street or working in your garden after a sudden spring or summer rain, you will see large numbers of these "wigglers" which the water has driven to the surface from the seclusion of their underground burrows or their hiding places beneath leaves, boards or stones.

This situation which heralds a field day for the birds is a calamity to the worm, which is ill-equipped to appreciate either the splendor or the hazards of a newly refurbished earth and who retreats as soon as possible to the protection of his subterranean life.

"Only a worm" is a common but often misused expression to designate anything that crawls. For instance, any insect which has complete metamorphosis passes through the "worm" or caterpillar stage.

THE APPLE worm, the wire worm and the cabbage worm are each in turn the larval stages of the codling moth, the click beetle and the common white cabbage butterfly.

Some 20,000 species of true worms have been described. These are divided into two great groups, the flat worms and the segmented worms. The earthworm belongs to the latter order.

Worms are widely distributed over the earth's surface. They crawl over the ground, burrow into the earth, swim in the water or live attached to the outside or housed inside other animals.

While some, like the earthworm, are of great value to man, many parasitic types such as hookworms, liver fluke, tapeworm and trichina worm bring great suffering and in many cases death involving both men and animals in their complicated life cycle.

EARTHWORMS are more plentiful than you may think. Thousands are working silently plowing up the garden, lawn and field. Their bodies are marked into jointed segments, equipped with short bristles. These act as an anchor, while the worm wiggles itself over the surface by contracting and relaxing its muscles.

There is no distinct head nor can one find eyes or sense organs. Breathing is accomplished through the thin skin, which is kept moist by a slimy mucus so that an exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide

reaches several feet into the ground in many directions. Each burrow has more than one opening from which they extend themselves at night to mate or feed.

They spend their days in the warm damp soil digging deeper in hot dry weather to find moisture without which they cannot live. Unless their burrows are flooded they withdraw at dawn or at the slightest jarring of a footfall.

Many scientists have found the life-history of the earthworm an interesting study. As early as 1777 Gilbert White wrote "... the earth without them would soon become cold, hard-bound and consequently sterile."

Charles Darwin made intensive studies showing that in a field having a normal population of some 50,000 earthworms per acre, an equivalent of 18 wagon loads of soil would pass through the digestive tracts of these miniature plowmen each year and that this action would result in an accumulation of one inch of castings and subsoil every five years.

Darwin concluded by writing, "It may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so important a part in the history of the world as have these lowly organized creatures."

The English botanist W. H. Hudson extended these studies showing how over-zealous gardeners were starving the earthworms by their tidy habits of clearing the lawn of every bit of debris, thereby impoverishing the soil.

He also found that when a certain area became overpopulated earthworms added a chemical to the soil to discourage further population.

Most of us have long thought of the earthworm as bait for the fisherman. His value to the farmer is now so well established that farms for the culture of this lowly creature have been established.

Earthworms not only eat dirt as they dig their way into the soil, but they come up to the surface at night and with their sucking mouth-parts, drag bits of humus into their burrows. Much of this food is not absorbed and is deposited around the mouth of the tunnel as "castings".

In the process of its journey through the worm's digestive tract, this material is fertilized by internal secretions. This process represents a double benefit for plants. The burrows open up the soil allowing the entrance of life-giving air and water so essential to growth and the fertilizer in the worm castings is later washed back into the soil.

Earthworms often prepare their tunnels where they are roofed by flat stones or rocks which are warmed by the sun. Their excavated life cycle.

One such at Ontario, Calif. grows thousands of worms in culture beds similar to those used in growing mushrooms. They are fed a balanced diet and, when two or three months old, are packed in soil and peat moss and shipped to farmers all over the country.

In addition to fertilizing the soil, earthworms are the chief food of many species of birds and quadrupeds. Though so small and insignificant and crushed underfoot, they make a strong link in the chain of life which binds all of us together into a living whole.

OK Lily Sale

Permission to conduct the annual Lily Sale on the streets of Birmingham has been granted to the Birmingham Rotary club by city commissioners. Date of the sale to benefit the Oakland County Crippled Children's Society has been set for April 17.

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