

Crazy Worms –REALLY!!

The next invasive horror story is about worms... not our beloved earthworms so much as the Jumping Worms, Snake Worms, Crazy Worms, or whatever you want to call them, that have invaded our North East parks, gardens, forests, and compost piles (as well as those in the South East and Midwest). They are here and they are altering the physical, chemical and biological structure of our soil and making it inhospitable to many native plants.

As it turns out, there should not be any worms east of the Great Plains or north of the Mason Dixon Line; they were all wiped out during the Ice Age. The earthworms we so treasure now in our gardens and compost piles are European worms, not native worms, and are on every continent but Antarctica. Annise Dobson of Yale University calls it “*global worming*”. Worms cycle through piles of leaves and sticks, mixing soil layers, and fundamentally changing the ecosystem within the soil. This is not so terrible for our gardens, but it is bad for our forests. Forests are meant to rely on bacteria and fungi to release nutrients, evolving delicate, interdependent, diverse systems - without worms.

As of the last decade, we now have worms on steroids. Jumping worms came from eastern Asia, probably in potted plants, soil, or nursery stock, no doubt the same way the European worms arrived. When disturbed, these worms wriggle vigorously, thrashing about like snakes (hence, “Snake Worm”). They are smooth and glossy, dark brown or gray, not the red-brown of a Night Crawler/earthworm, and have a flat milky-white band that goes all the way around their body near their head, rather than the partial, pink, raised band halfway down the length of an earthworm. Jumpers live for one season; they die in the fall after dropping tiny brown cocoons that look like peppercorns into the soil for the winter. Cocoons hatch in the spring, maturing in 60 days. They don’t need a mate to reproduce and can generate several generations in a season. They can grow to 6” long by late summer and multiply so fast they quickly overcome earthworms.

Jumping worms are voracious eaters, devouring leaf litter so fast that the soil looks like coffee grounds offering little nutritional benefit to plant, insect, and animal life. Jumpers live in the top 6” of the soil, and do not mix soil layers 4-6’ deep as do earthworms. Whereas earthworms move about 30’ in a season, Jumping Worms can cover 17 acres (13 football fields!) eliminating 95% of the leaf litter. When organic matter has no time to decompose and return goodness to the soil, trees are deprived of vital nutrients, seedlings and wildflowers fail to grow, habitat for wildlife, birds and insects disappear and ecological diversity is threatened. And then the invasive plants move in!!

To determine if you have these Crazy Worms, look for telltale “coffee grounds” in your gardens and woods, and then create a “mustard pour” combining one gallon water and 1/3 cup ground yellow mustard. Pour slowly onto the soil and wait. The slurry will not kill Jumpers, but it will irritate them into activity and soon the ground will wriggle to life as in an old horror movie! If you see them, bag them in plastic bags, leave in the sun for 10 minutes and throw into the trash.

Jumping Worms are difficult to eliminate. It is best never to introduce them to your property. Check the dirt of potted plants, or buy bare rooted stock, and only purchase compost that has been heated to kill pathogens. Do not buy Jumpers for bait, vermicomposting, or gardening. Clean your tools, shoes, and clothes so you don't spread the almost invisible cocoons. And if you have Jumping Worms, do not share plants or move them to new areas.

These Crazy Jumping Snake Worms are the next invasive threat to our precious and fragile ecosystem. They strip the soil surface of protective organic matter, depriving it of essential nutrients and fungi, making it unable to sustain life and prone to erosion. We all need to be vigilant, knowledgeable, and aware.

Talk about a real-life horror story... these critters even drop their tails when you handle them!

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