

Earthworms and Other Inspiration

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For many years, I had the opportunity to live and garden in an area with fertile soil, near the French Alps. I grew flowers, treasures to behold and valued by local wildlife, on the abundant terrain. In 2016, I moved to upstate New Hampshire, a region similar in topology to that of my homeland. I had assumed it would be easy to transfer my gardening know-how. Was I ever surprised! When I arrived at Twin Mountain, the land that greeted me on the south side of Little River was not a welcome mat of potential flower growth. *Au contraire!* I discovered that the area was covered in coarse sand sediment, a result of past glacial movements in this part of the country. Quite dissimilar from the alpine terrain I was used to, this porous medium would not retain sufficient water to keep a flower garden alive. Moreover, heavy rainfall had acidified the sand over time, such that attempts to use it for growing plants, even with the drainage problem corrected, would deal them a grim fate.

With such a challenge apparent in these circumstances, my autopilot short-circuited, as if without a map in new territory. How could I reverse this curse on my dreams? The long-acting reaches of nature, dominating and dwarfing human efforts, rendered this environment. What could I do to see my roses, clematis, and delphinium again, products of my handiwork?

I recalled the gifts of my former life, given by nature, foiling my acceptance in the here and now. The raw realization of past beauty, so blighting the present, set in. But as good nature does, this harshness gave way to a flood of gratitude for the provenance eddying in my memory. How could I not meet it here? My resolve was firming. Before long, I was ready to work.

First, I read that leaf compost, created with the help of lowly creatures called earthworms, reverses soil acidity. These invertebrates, placed into a ten-inch top layer of leaves, power soil transformations by eating leaf matter and excreting casts—their nutrient-rich waste material. I was happy to learn that earthworms never damage a plant—on the contrary, they eat only decaying material in the production of high-quality fertilizer.

Moved to action, I set out to build a worm colony, duly heaping ten inches of leaves on my garden beds, waiting for a company of these creatures to assemble. Easier to read about in books than to achieve in the real world! I waited and watched over time, yet saw not a single worm in the leaves or the soil! Undaunted, I spent two hundred dollars on worms over the internet. The new mail-order brood, accounted for at the outset, didn't survive the winter. Persisting, I tried more rugged worm varieties from local angler suppliers. My friends and family saw an ardor in my purpose, joining me in it and donating precious worms from their own gardens.

Eventually, I began to see signs of the residents I had hoped for. I remember the day of my first worm sighting, and my jubilation, relaying details of the new wiggle show to my husband, Tom. To me, this was major news in our small part of the world. During that year, I saw a worm three times, my heart beating with joy at each occasion. During the following year, I recruited more store-bought worms, seeing four in the summertime flower beds, right as rain in the leaves meant for them.

In parallel with these neighborhood gambits, I kept learning and discovered there are 100 different types of garden worms. I began noticing individuals. At first blush, these tiny beings appeared bland—a nondescript, homogeneous element against a backdrop of the emerging spring. Yet, as cursory glances gave way to discernment, their colors came to life. Depending on the source, these were reddish, greyish, pink-hued, and brown forms amongst the variegated greens of the season. Some were round, some flattened, some had distinctive pointy ends, and some were butt-ended,

missing a point entirely.

With common names providing clues as to when they are most active (their genus-species designation is *Lumbricus terrestris*), the new crew could be differentiated as rain worms, dew worms, and nightcrawlers at work. Each type of worm has unique habits, rhythms, and speeds according to the time of day. I noticed some writhing alongside one another, reacting differently to the same stimulus—some excited, others in stealth mode.

Thinking they might need a nudge in the fertility department, I watched videos, learning that earthworms are hermaphrodites—possessing both male and female characteristics. Given this, they do not asexually reproduce, but require a second worm from within the same species to procreate. They never interbreed. During the summer season, all worms sport a fertility ring—whitish swellings wrapped around their bodies, near their heads, where their eggs are stored until maturity.

With my growing knowledge of these sweethearts, I became more attached. I watched with my own eyes as, committed to their metabolizing rituals, they converted matter in the garden. Not only do they create healthy nutrition for the plants, but their burrowing motions create air pockets, expanding space for root growth. With a little help in the beginning, here they were, dedicated to reciprocal care. You can never have enough worms to spread the love!

During one winter, I read about other helpful additives that I could use to amend and improve the soil. I experimented with ashes to provide sweetness, lime to add magnesium, sawdust to provide organic matter, eggshells to add calcium, horse manure for nitrogen content, and mulch on top to keep it together. Little by little, these enhancements yielded rewards, with several new associates emerging in our oldest garden beds during the following spring. We also found a worm or two in our extended gardens. Eventually, the worm-human joint project to help the soil paid off, as I now see a breathtaking bounty in the flower beds.

Earthworms live under the constant threat of attack, as a nutrition source for moles, mice, birds, toads, snakes, and even ants. I watched with horror as one of my spineless allies became a meal, chewed at ferociously from all sides by a gang of about twenty ants. From that point on, I began to worry at times, sleepless at night and in the early morning, concerned about the welfare of my garden companions.

Robins have joined us during the last nine years, building nests on our porch and garage rafters. With this activity, so many earthworms became food that I realized their plans had become part of a larger one, no longer in my control. At the cruel predation of lives I once guarded, I grew bittersweet, heedful of the beauty in a new design. One eye is wary, the other twinkles in delight. Oh, that ambiguity! I watch the final acts of earthworm existence—a relinquishing of form, generously yielding capacitance to other lives carrying it on. Although these treasured earthworms cannot live forever, in their lives, they continue to sustain the soil and inspire me to care for them. They helped me learn to love the land I had, and could love on my own. That partnership will live on.

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