

CHRIS' CORNER



Earthworms: A Gardener's Friend

Last month I started preparing my garden beds for some annual plantings. I have several beds in my landscape where the soil is fertile and rich as a result of adding compost and humus to it. As I was digging in these beds I discovered earthworms were plentiful in my garden. What a welcomed site they were!

Earthworms can dramatically alter the structure of the soil, water movement, nutrient dynamics, and plant growth. Their presence in the soil is usually an indicator of a healthy soil system. Earthworms burrow through the soil creating tunnels which aerates the soil to allow air, water and nutrients to reach deep within the soil. Soils which are rich in organic matter such as decaying vegetation or leaves are what the earthworms love to eat. It is important to understand that the plants cannot use this organic matter directly. After the organic matter is digested, the earthworm releases waste from their bodies called castings. Castings contain many nutrients that are beneficial to plants. Many gardeners use earthworm castings as garden fertilizer.

Hopefully you have seen these soft, slimy, invertebrates in your own garden. Earthworms are hermaphrodites meaning that they exhibit both male and female characteristics. Although they are hermaphrodites, most need a mate to reproduce. Earthworms occur in most temperate soils and many tropical soils as well. There are more than 7,000 species of earthworms. They range from an inch to two yards in length and can be found seasonally at all depths in the soil.

Charles Darwin, who was known for this theory of evolution, wrote a paper on earthworms during his final years. He concluded that most all of the fertile soil on earth must have passed through the gut of an earthworm. This is not entirely correct but earthworms do play an important role in soil and plant health. So the next time you see earthworms in your garden don't just think of them as fish bait. Know

that having earthworms in your garden is an excellent indicator that you have healthy soil. Until next time, happy gardening!



Christopher Campbell