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City of Minnetonka

Global Worming



Earthworms live mostly in darkness, among fallen leaves or within the soil. Their tube-shaped bodies have no bones, and it's hard to tell head from tail. Despite their strange appearance and hidden lifestyles, earthworms are familiar and rather fascinating. So, it might surprise you to learn that in Minnesota, earthworms are considered invasive. All earthworm species in our woodlands, grasslands, farm fields and yards were brought here from Europe or Asia.

Gone with the glaciers

In many parts of the world, earthworms are a helpful part of woodland, grassland and other environments. They feed on decaying plants on or near the soil surface and leave behind “castings” - waste that contains minerals and nutrients - used by growing plants and soil microbes. As earthworms move through the soil, they also create air spaces that can trap water and gases, like carbon dioxide.

That all sounds pretty good. So why does Minnesota label earthworms as invasive? Thousands of years ago, glaciers scoured away soils across the northern half of the continent. The soils have been slowly rebuilt, and Minnesota's lush ecosystems adapted other ways to break down dead plant material without earthworms.



Overeaters

Millions of leaves fall every year in wooded areas of Minnesota, including Minnetonka's community forest. This thick layer, called “duff,” covers the soil like a blanket and is slowly decomposed by fungi, bacteria and other organisms.

Earthworms can eat faster than leaves fall. As a result, soil may erode from these exposed areas or become hard. If the soil washes away, roots of mature trees are exposed and plant seedlings – including young trees and shrubs, ferns and wildflowers – are less likely to survive.



What you can do

There is no approved chemical or biological treatment to control earthworms. Prevention is the best cure. Keep these tips in mind:

- Don't add earthworms to outdoor compost piles.
- If you buy compost, consider freezing it for one week to kill off any live earthworms or eggs.
- Dispose of leftover bait worms in the trash.
- When you buy potted plants, check the soil for earthworms.

Also keep an eye out for jumping worms. This species was recently introduced from Asia and strips the soil of nutrients. Jumping worms are extremely active when disturbed, and are usually found in the first few inches of soil. Report any sightings to the [invasive species database](#).

Photo credits: Joseph Berger, Bugwood.org (common earthworm); Josef Gorres – University of Vermont, Bugwood.org (tree roots); Christine Petersen (child; leaves)



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