

Evening Meeting - **Worms in our Garden**

Dr. Jackie Stroud, based at Rothamstead Research, told us more about worms than we ever imagined. Darwin spent years studying them, and even turned his dining room into a worm area. He found their favourite food to be carrot tops. Some worms are nocturnal, and we saw lob worms gathering leaves, feeding and burrowing. There are 29 species in our soil, with 3 groups. The largest ones are deep burrowers, whilst smaller ones stay near the surface, and litter dwellers stay in the leaf litter. Topsoil dwellers sift earth for food but deep dwellers drag organic materials below.

Striped worms will be found in the compost heap, but leave them there as they will die on your lawn. Green and Grey worms are the most common, with deep burrowers being about the size of a pencil. They can burrow down to 6ft and can live for 5-10 years. Their burrowing is highly important for the soil, allowing water to penetrate, and to improve aeration. They burrow down to avoid freezing in winter or drying out in summer. Worm casts are high in nutrients, and worms improve crop production by up to 25%. Ploughing and soil disturbance is very detrimental for earthworm numbers, and they can become extinct in over-utilized fields. There is a trend for Zero Tillage farming, where machines cut narrow furrows, seed them and cover all in one pass thus minimizing damage and compaction.

Surface worms can self-reproduce, but deep burrowers come to the surface on damp, warm, moonless nights to look for a mate, always keeping the end of their tail in the burrow in case of a quick getaway.

Worms dislike sandy soils, and chalk is shallow so clay soils are their favourites. Melon and banana peel is a great treat for worms in compost but strictly avoid citrus fruits. The New Zealand flatworm is an imported pest in Ireland but dislikes wet soils, so are hopefully unlikely to be found here. Compost of flower beds really helps increase worm numbers, but changing the soil pH will be harmful. Fertiliser encourages plant growth and thus leaf litter which worms like. This talk was fascinating, and the large number of questions from the audience testified to the general interest. So be kind to worms, and they do NOT grow again if you chop them in half!