

WORMS: Night Monsters become Horticultural Heroes.

Ann Brown

I've become embroiled with worms once again. I plan to pick up some red wigglers soon to start a new worm compost bin. I'm excited, a little nervous and determined to ease my guilt. My relationship with worms has not always been a good one.

It all started with a bag of acorns in my sister's room. She must have kept this treasure bag for months. Thus when we opened it, the acorns were writhing with maggots. To be fair, worms and maggots are not the same, but to my young eyes I was staring at a bag of filthy white worms. It was shortly after that that the worm nightmares began.

The dream was always the same. I would look at my walls and the worms would appear. At first a few, but soon millions of worms would be inching down the wood. Then, of course, they would jump toward my bed and begin the slow march to my pillow. At this point I usually ran shrieking down the hall for my parent's bedroom.

This dream occurred for months (or years or decades in my parents' memory). It got to a point where my parents, hoping to avoid my waking up the whole house, would appear with flashlights. When they arrived, the worms instantly vanished. They flashed

the beam on my walls while impatiently muttering, “See, no worms! Now, go back to sleep.” And I did, eventually, although sometimes the worms would reappear a few more times.

Like most things in childhood, luckily, the phase passed. The dream worms faded away deep in my memory. The next time the dream occurred was fifteen years later. I had spent the day sorting bulk raisins at the local food co-op in Burlington, Vermont. That night the dream revisited. Thankfully, it was a one night engagement.

Flash forward twenty years, and I was digging in my Flagstaff garden. My two pre-school age daughters were wildly exuberant about the earthworms that I turned over. Boldly, they picked them up, shrieking with delight at the baby worms or the extra large worms. They loved the plump ones and the berry red ones. They could not get enough of the worms, and soon they had made homes for them. However, they did not live in a bag in our house but were returned to the earth nightly.

Caught up in their enthusiasm, I picked them up, too. They really were amazing: soft, squiggly, and stretchy. They swam through the earth and created pockets of air for my struggling vegetables roots. I was thankful for them. What had once been a monster in my dreams became a hero in my garden. My relationship with worms had started a new phase.

A few years later I built my first worm composter. First, we made a bin out of a plastic storage container by drilling small holes in the sides. I got some red wigglers from the CSA while my husband brought home lots of shredded paper. We put the moistened paper, the worms, and some food scraps in the bottom of the bin. We covered that with a white garbage bag and then shut the lid. Voila, a worm composting factory was born. Each week or so we added some more food scraps. The worms thrived. They reproduced and most importantly they pooped. Their poop, aka vermiculture, became our super fertilizer. It was a symbiotic relationship until.....

I'm actually embarrassed to tell this part. We had a family emergency where we were gone for a month. While we were away, I forgot to have someone throw them a few scraps now and then. And when we returned, honestly, I forgot about them.... for months. When I finally checked in on them, they were gone. Nothing was left in the bin except for worm poop. I had neglected my garden heroes.

So, it is with some trepidation that I introduce myself to worms again. I hope that they and I once again return to a mutually beneficial relationship.

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