



California Gardeners' Club

Newsletter November 2020

www.californiagardenersclub.co.uk

War of Worms by Maurice May

Some 27 years ago we moved from Bracknell to our current bungalow in Wokingham. After a year or so it became obvious that there was a severe worm infestation on the front lawn. This was a little strange to me, since I had dug 2 x 10 pole allotments for 27 years and during that time I only ever found 3 worms. This, despite adding copious amounts of compost (see my other *magnus opus* Adventures in Manure vols. 1 & 2). However, at that time, the gardening club trading hut sold worm killer which solved the problem after a couple of applications.

When we moved in, the back garden consisted of lots of concrete, a wide sennico, 5 stunted apple trees, a wonky summer house and a depression in the grass covered with black polythene which the estate agent, with more imagination than Walt Disney, called a garden pond. The green area would be described, in agriculture terms, as rough pasture.

Over the next few years, the apple trees were up rooted, the sennico tamed, the summer house unworked, the concrete replaced with paving slabs, flower beds raised and the frogs evicted and the pond filled in (sorry frogs). The grass was mowed relentlessly until it could be called a lawn. This was the status quo until our last dog went to cock its leg on the Great Lamppost in the sky.

We then decided to revamp the garden by replacing the slabs with black limestone paving, reshaping and reurfing the lawn. We were given a choice of turf. There was the hardwearing version, or the higher quality turf for the more discerning gardener. This turf apparently is delivered on a Tuesday from Yorkshire in a refrigerated lorry. There was, however, a problem. The lawn was covered in worm castes indicating quite a lot of worm activity. However, by now the EU had (bless their cotton socks) banned the use of worm killer for domestic use.

I suggested to the landscaper that he laid a layer of sand before laying the turf since I had had so few worms on my sandy soil at Bracknell. He took advice from his alma mater Burchetts Green College. They concurred and further suggested spraying with a worm deterrent called Castoff. The War of Worms had begun.

The turf was duly delivered from Yorkshire, on a Tuesday, in a refrigerated lorry along with sand and topsoil. To any aficionados, the turf was a beauty to behold and they would like to know that it was a blend of Slender Creeping Red Fescue and Chewings Fescue. Each blade was the correct social distance, for grass, from its neighbour and exactly 1 inch (or 2.54 cms if you have been decimated) tall. James, the landscaper, sprayed the soil with the recommended Castoff, laid the sand,

Things to note

1. Our next meeting, scheduled for the 7th December, will be held over Zoom. Watch out for the emails and see inside newsletter for more details.
2. Trading Hut –now closed for the Winter.
3. Show other members something you are proud of (XMAS related). See inside newsletter for more details.
4. Free membership next year.). See inside newsletter for more details.
5. Member's articles. See inside newsletter for more details.

sprayed with Castoff, laid the topsoil, sprayed with Castoff, laid the turf and sprayed with Castoff. And three weeks later the worms returned.

I swept off the worm casts and sprayed with Castoff.

And three days later the worms returned.

I repeated this several times over the next few weeks until I had exhausted the supply of Castoff.

Discussing the problem with a colleague over a drink he advised connecting a brass or copper tube to the main electricity and pushing the tube into the lawn. The worms come wriggling to the surface. Apparently, he used this method to acquire worms for fishing. Now I am not a fan of Health and Safety (considering it to be a science made out of common sense) but this did seem a little risky. So, I filed the idea away.

An internet search came up with the following facts. Worms had been found at 10 ft below ground, there are 26 species of worms in the UK, somewhere in South America a 10ft worm was found (imagine the size of that worm cast!). Also, worms were generally active from September to March. My worms did not have access to the internet, so they didn't know this. Also because of the warmer winters there was no hard frosts to drive the worms deeper in the soil. So, they worked 24/7 365 days a year.

The other piece of information was that, if you cut a worm in half you don't get two worms, you just get one unhappy worm! The most useful information was that worms do not like acidic soil. This triggered a programme over the next year to increase the acidity of the soil. I applied sulphate of ammonia in large amounts but only succeeded in scorching the grass. I applied sulphur in liquid and pellet form, all to no avail.

At this point I wondered if there was a commercial version of my colleague's electrical solution. There was, in America for 30 dollars, but it worked off of 115v not 240v.

The worms continued to disfigure my lawn, which as I mentioned was delivered in a refrigerated lorry from Yorkshire on a Tuesday.

The next solution was to use Green Thumbs worm deterrent service. They came and sprayed the lawn and said to call them if the worms returned in 3weeks.

They did and so did Green Thumb.

And they returned and so did Green Thumb." Persistent little beggars aren't they?" said Green Thumb.

The worms reappeared and this time Green Thumb asked that I spike the lawn prior to them coming and they would spray at the maximum strength recommended by the manufacturer.

As I started to spike the lawn worms came to the surface in quite large numbers. I then started to count how many worms I could collect. By the time I finished spiking I had collected over 800 worms. These I put in the compost bin. (Yes, I know earthworms aren't the ideal compost makers but what would you do with them? I could hardly take them to a charity shop, could I? Although later on I did export over a 1000 as far as Crowthorne to a garden that had a worm drought).

After 3weeks the worms returned but I didn't have the nerve to recall Green Thumb.

I then had another look at the American worm extractor online. However, the device had been withdrawn from sale as 13 American anglers had electrocuted themselves. Thus proving, that my first instincts were right.

Next, I tried a product called Castaway with the same negative results as all the other remedies. Every morning the sheer number of worm casts rendered the lawn virtually a no-go zone until the casts had dried out sufficiently to be able to sweep them up. (Roughly a kilogramme of cast every other day).

Desperation was setting in. I decided that perhaps the electrical method was the answer. After all, my drinking companion was still alive and, at the risk of upsetting any American anglers in the gardening club, perhaps they were not too well endowed in the commonsense department. A visit was made to the Come-in-Handy section of my workshop where items had languished for years, awaiting a use. Their time had come!

A small wooden box that once housed a bottle of vintage port, a double pole switch, a lamp holder to remind me that the device was switched on, a plastic yoghurt drink container for an insulated handle, cable and a brass tube from a door chime (ding dong Avon calling – remember the TV advert?) and plenty of insulating tape, altogether these made my first, and hopefully safe, worm extractor.

With the probe deployed in the lawn I switched on and within minutes worms from a 3ft diameter area came wiggling to the surface, over 50 of them. The probe needed moving every 6/7 minutes or so. This means that it was time consuming. Over the next 2 days I took 1457 worms from my lawn. Perhaps I should tell you that the lawn is an irregular shape but approximately 16yds by 4yds.

Three days later the worms returned.

So, I spent many hours over the next 12 months. Each 2 hour session yielded about 300 or so worms.

The following year I added another probe which halved the time it took to cover the whole lawn. The next year I ditched the 2 probe setup and developed a new design with 4 probes. These I spaced out across the lawn and moved about a yard every 10 minutes. This way the whole lawn could be “electrified” in less than 2 hours. But the worms continued to return.

Then one summer the worms cottoned on that they were meant to be inactive and disappeared for some 3 months. The lawn was usable every day without the necessity of waiting for the worm casts to dry and be swept up.

Then in September another problem arose. Over a few days brown patches, the size of saucers, appeared on my lawn, which, I remind you, came from Yorkshire, in a refrigerated lorry on a Tuesday. I had now a plague of leather jackets lurking under the lawn, munching the roots of my lovely turf. Luckily the remedy was easy – nematodes. These must be the bargain of all time, costing less than £25 per 50 million and they work.

At this point

“Why no pictures?” I hear you cry
“Because I’m a lousy photographer” I reply
And a poet, you imply!

I continued probing the lawn and the numbers of casts began to reduce slightly. Then we had a long hot summer and the lawn died off in some areas. The experts advised against watering with the assurance that the grass would reappear. It did, but not the grass that, if I remember correctly, might have come from Yorkshire, probably in a refrigerated lorry and perhaps on a Tuesday. In fact, what appeared would be described in agriculture terms as rough pasture. The good news was that the number of worms extracted had decreased from high hundreds to high tens. I felt the War was now more of a skirmish.

Then in 2019 we had some work done indoors which involved, amongst other things, changing the electrical consumer unit (fuse box in old money). The new one had an RCD integral to it. Now an RCD used to be called a current leakage detector and my worm extractor did just that, it leaked current to earth thus tripping the RCD and cutting the electrical supply to the whole house. Without considerable rewiring there was no answer. It was a disaster, so I am back to the time consuming spiking of the lawn which is not nearly as efficient.

At this time a thought flashed through my brain, which, if it became common knowledge, would have had me excommunicated from the gardening club (Plastic grass!)

To make matters worse, the worms have returned to the front lawn after nearly 20 years.

Déjà vu!

Free membership next year

Given these exceptional circumstances, the committee have agreed that membership to the club, next year, will be FREE. We committee appreciates the support members have shown throughout 2020.

You have continued:

1. to purchase your supplies from the Trading Hut (over 60% of members used hut) and most paying direct to the club's bank account,
2. enter and vote in the 'Virtual Shows'
3. use the Tool Sharpening service
4. and paid your subs for 2020

Your continued support has given the committee the drive to continue their work.

Topical Tip – October 2020

One of the great successes of plant breeding during the last decade or so, has been the development of winter flowering pansies. Available in garden centres from early autumn, they are ideal plants with which to furnish window boxes and pots. They will flower for most of the winter although during very wet weather, the flowers tend to rot off, but rejuvenation is rapid in the spring. They will continue to give an excellent display until early summer. They require little attention but do occasionally suffer from aphids. The aphids are to be found on the underside of the leaves and should be controlled as an increasing infestation will affect the quality of the plants as they come out of the winter. You often hear the expression 'if we have a hard winter it will kill the bugs.' Well it certainly won't in most cases and especially where aphids are concerned. Most aphid species will survive in very cold conditions – down to -10° C. Controlling the aphids will help to produce a fine display in the spring.

Zoom meeting 7th December

Why not join the December club meeting on the 7th December at 8pm to hear and watch Stuart Slocombe give us a talk on 'Kew and Keukenhof'.

Yes, a meeting is being held over the internet and using zoom. It's really easy to use. We test ran it with a member who had never used it before and it all worked really well.

To make it easy for members to join this meeting, we will be assisting those who have never used zoom by calling a week before the meeting on the phone and talking them through the setup and use. As I said earlier, a test run with a guinea pig member showed us how easy it was.

If you would like to join the meeting on the 7th and have not used zoom before, please reply to this email as soon as possible and we will contact you by phone (don't forget to give us your number) to talk you through setup and a test run.

If you would like to join and have used zoom before, then just wait for the zoom invite on the Monday of the meeting.

Member's Articles

Why not try your hand at an article for the newsletter.

We have just had one entitled 'Worms' which demonstrates there are members chomping at the bit to be authors. It can be serious, funny or a combination. Share your tricks in gardening; your special way of dealing with things. Just email it to us and we will do the rest.

XMAS

We are thinking about a virtual show, around Christmas, entitled '**XMAS item you are proud of**'

We will run it along the same lines as the previous virtual shows but there will be no winners.

It's an opportunity for members to show something relating to Christmas to other members. So start thinking what it might be and get the camera snapping. More information later in the month.

Monthly talks

This is a call to all members: if you have any ideas/requests for the subjects of the monthly talks, please let us know. Either reply to this email or give Hermione a ring (number below).

Chairman: Dick Hawes 0118 979 3730	Hon. Treasurer: Peter Radband 07976 640989	Programmes: Hermione Lewis 0118 989 1671	Committee Member: Jayne Male
Deputy Chairman: Ian Gillott 0118 9892649	Trading Hut: Stuart Slocombe 0118 9734531	Membership: Kerry Eaton 07736 022361	Co-opted Member: Marise Radband 01344 774310
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