

Gardening

Toads in the garden cut back on insects

By Pat Leuchtman
leisure Columnist

There is a toad in my living room this morning. How he sneaked in past the dog, cats and chickens is something I'll never know. While I'm not too happy to have him as a housecleaning companion, I love entertaining him in the garden, even if I do still jump when he crosses my path.

The garden is filled with more than vegetables. I've seen toads, snakes and earthworms. Though they may not be the loveliest of God's creatures, I am filled with gratitude that they live in my garden because they are a tangible sign that the soil is throbbing with all kinds of life; that it hasn't been killed by constant applications of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

These creatures are not only a sign of life, they enhance it. My Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening assures me that in three months each of my toads will eat 10,000 insects, including the dreaded cutworm.

Snakes also eat large numbers of harmful insects and small rodents. I'm happy to invite them into the garden for their meals.

And while we are on the subject of insect catchers — behold the birds. Beautiful, cheerful and hungry! Knowing that the killdeer running through the pasture considers 300 mosquito larvae a dainty snack, and that the chickadees feast on tent caterpillar moth eggs, I would never try to keep them out of the garden with flapping tin pie plates.

I'm sure the reason my old apple trees still grow such good fruit, not Fancy Grade, but sound and attractive, is because the natural balances are in effect and haven't been disrupted by repeated and unnecessary applications of poison.

I hope to harvest a good berry crop and I think there is enough for the birds and us. Especially since I already have lots of sumac and chokecherries that the birds find tempting. Still, next spring when I order currants, raspberries and hickory trees, I will also order mulberry and



bittersweet for the birds.

Bending over my garden beds, I must admit that probably my favorite garden creature is the lowly earthworm. They do so much for the garden that it is hard to know where to begin in praising them.

Most obviously they burrow through the soil making channels that permit the rain to penetrate instead of running off. These burrows also make it easier for plant roots to develop. Roots actually grow in the spaces between soil particles so the more spaces, the better they grow.

In addition, worms eat organic matter on top of and in the soil. After they digest this they deposit their castings along the burrows. These castings are a wonderfully rich fertilizer. Finally their dead bodies remain in the soil to decay and provide more fertilizer.

Garden Way in Charlotte, Vt., has published a booklet, What Every Gardener Should Know About Earthworms, which includes the results of several experiments. One showed that rye grass grown in earthworm rich soil grew richer and faster and more healthy looking than that grown in wormless soil. This provides grounds for argument that earthworms do affect the nutrient supply ability of the soil.

Since earthworms improve soil structure, fertilize the plants and even release nutrients from organic material and increase the availability of inorganic minerals, you can understand why I can hardly bear to have any of them used as fishing bait.

I was chatting with Tina Smith at the extension service the other day and she has several very useful pamphlets available. They include Using Fewer Pesticides in the Home Garden and Controlling Insects and Disease in the Home Orchard Without Using Insecticides. The latter includes wonderful photographs of damage caused by different pests and the insects themselves.

This should be an immense help in enabling you to identify problems and take appropriate action. She also reminded me that now is the time to divide your iris plants and the extension booklet, Growing Iris, will give you detailed directions on how to do it. Tina camps out in the trailer behind the courthouse on Hope Street and she is full of help, advice and information. □



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