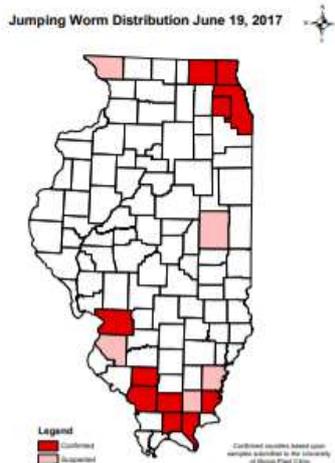


JUMPING WORMS

Have you heard about Jumping Worms? If you are anyone who enjoys getting their hands dirty in the soil be aware! As gardeners we think of earthworms as happily improving our soil with their aerating tunnels and highly fertile poop or red wigglers devouring our kitchen leftovers to make rich compost. But a new worm discovered in 11 Illinois counties (and suspected in 4) can alter the structure and chemistry of our forests and landscapes.



Photo: Wisconsin DNR



Jumping worms also known as crazy worms, Alabama jumpers, and snake worms are originally from East Asia. They are currently considered invasive in New England and southern Appalachians. In 2013 they were found in Wisconsin and in Northern Illinois they were discovered in 2015. They are “suspected” in JoDavies County, the closest site to the Quad Cities.

Another exotic invading our landscapes? Do realize most of the earthworms we see now are not native, but of European descent. You can thank the glaciers that descended over northern North America wiping out the native worms in our part of the continent.

Worms, native or not, are basically eating machines. They love to live and feed in different levels of soil – leaf litter dwellers, topsoil dwellers and subsoil dwellers. Jumping worms are litter and upper topsoil dwellers. They love the decaying leaves and twigs of forests. Our propensity to mulch every inch of our gardens and landscapes render our yards perfect candidates for bounding populations of jumping worms.

Jumping worms are voracious consumers of organic material, which can affect soil quality. The concern is the fact they can consume the litter layer faster than any other earthworm in the state. Where jumping worms are present, fallen leaves and topsoil are processed by the worms until the soil becomes granular, dry and looks similar to coffee grounds. They also breed quickly and eggs survive Illinois winters. Adults reach maturity in approximately 60 days, allowing populations to grow exponentially during the growing season. These worms are also capable of reproducing without mating. Sheer numbers are a concern as populations of jumping worms can be ten times higher than other worms. The resulting infestations in other parts of the country include soil degradation by reduced soil fertility and loss of soil structure. Forest soils infested with jumping worms are left bare of any vegetation to the point where a "worm front" becomes obvious.

There are concerns about the effects these worms will have on forests and other natural areas as well as agricultural and landscaped areas. Populations of jumping worms have the potential to expose the soil, change the soil structure, deplete available nutrients, damage plant roots, and alter water holding capacity of the soil and water runoff. This disturbance favors invasive plants, beginning a cycle of non-

native invasions competing for critical resource. The result is less diversity of native plants and animals in our forests.

What you can do –

- Learn to identify. Don't confuse them with the smaller red wigglers found in compost and used in vermiculture. Jumping worm adults are stocky 4-8 inches long with glossy dark grey to brown skin. As their name implies they are very active when disturbed thrashing wildly. They move more like a snake than a worm and may shed their tail like a lizard. Worms reproduce using a clitellum which in the case of jumping worms appears as a flat and milky white band around the worm. Clitellum is raised up in our common earthworm.
- In the spring you surely see a variety of European earthworms when you start working in your garden, planting and dividing perennials. These European earthworms have overwintered and become active and visible in the spring. Adult jumping worms do not survive our winters – there eggs do. They hatch in the spring and reach maturity by early summer so look for them late June until a freeze (October). In summer and fall look for them when mulching or composting.
- Reduce their likely spread via soil, compost, potted plants, fish bait or contaminated equipment.
- Don't buy jumping worms, crazy worms, Alabama jumpers or snake worms as fish bait.
- Dump extra bait worms in garbage, not in compost pile or on soil.
- Actively compost so pile heats up.
- Carefully inspect nursery plants before installing them in the landscape.
- When bringing in new plants consider gently removing soil, washing off the roots and planting in your soil. Place discarded soil and water into a black plastic garbage bag and store for a year or throw away. Any collected worms place in a black garbage bag and leave out in the sun for at least 10 minutes. Then throw bag away. You may be thanking yourself for this extra task!
- Check your property for earthworms using a mustard pour (it won't harm your plants!) Mix a gallon of water with 1/3 cup of ground yellow mustard seed and pour slowly into the soil. This will drive any worms to the surface. If you have jumping worms, report it and avoid moving plants or soil from your yard.

If you suspect jumping worms this summer Please contact your local Extension office and be prepared to bring in a sample.

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Sources: <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/cfiv/homeowners/160204.html>
<http://ccetompkins.org/resources/jumping-worm-fact-sheet>