

Protect CF Gardens and Forests from Invasive Worms

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

In general, earthworms are considered harmless, beneficial residents of the soil in agriculture and home garden areas. They break down dead and decaying organic matter into rich humus soil that supports plant growth, and dig tiny channels that aerate soil and improve drainage. However, even the well known common (European) earthworm will deplete the forest floor of leaf litter and nutrients that native forest flora needs to flourish. (["My Forest Has Worms" video here.](#))

In WNC and in most other parts of the US, there are several species of invasive worms that are of major concern. They are the Asian jumping worm (top photo), the hammer head (middle photo), and the terrestrial flatworm (bottom photo), which first arrived here in the early 1900s, tucked away in the soil of potted plants. In recent decades these invasive species as well as the more common earthworm are now being found in natural forested ecosystems, which ultimately destroy those forest floors.

[Asian jumping worms](#) are also known as crazy snake worms, Alabama jumpers, and Jersey wigglers because they move more like a snake and can flip a foot off the ground, which is why they are used as fish bait. These worms are easy to find as they live in the top 6 inches of soil, which will look more like coffee grounds than soil. Jumping worms destroy common earthworms by wrapping themselves around them and digesting it from the outside in.



The jumping worm looks a lot like the common earthworm but there are noticeable differences such as color and location/size of the reproductive ring. The common worm moves slowly with its head (end closest to the ring) stretched in the direction it is going and then it pulls the rest of its body forward. Learn how to identify the differences between these two earthworms at [Meet the Jumping Worm.](#)

[Hammerhead flatworms](#) are about 1/8 inch wide and 1 foot long, with a rounded hammer shaped head. Avoid cutting it because the worm segments will regenerate into more worms.



[Terrestrial flatworms](#) resemble a slug but are dark brown, blue gray, or black. They wrap around their prey and digest it on the underside of their body where their mouth is located.

It is in the best interest of our forest as well as our gardens to identify and eliminate the bad worms as soon as they are discovered in your garden or landscape. To destroy the invaders, pick them up with a gloved hand (some species are toxic to the skin), place into a bag, add salt and throw it in the garbage. They are very sensitive to vinegar so consider carrying a spray bottle while gardening to spray and kill them.



To prevent further invasions be sure to check the dirt in the pot of plants that you purchase at a store/nursery or receive from friends. If you find worms or small yellow eggs, you should place them in a plastic bag with salt and dispose of them in the garbage.