Jumping Worms (Amynthas)

by Lyn Chimera

Metaphire and Amynthas worms have been in the area for quite a few years and seem to be spreading at a fast rate. Part of the problem is people (including myself) don't always recognize them. I saw some worms last fall near my compost pile. At first, I thought they might be jumping worms but felt sure they weren't because they didn't jump around and the soil didn't look like coffee grounds as the descriptions always state.

The important thing to know is they behave differently in the fall. Amyanthas die in the fall so are more sluggish and don't "jump" around. Also, in my soil the castings looked lumpy like those of regular earth worms, not like coffee grounds. Big mistake on my part. This fall I am seeing them more dispersed throughout the garden.

Sharon Bachman sent me a very helpful article on ID. The following info is from that article.

"The majority of both European exotic and native earthworms in the Northeast are in the family Lumbricidae. In contrast, the family Megascolecidae includes more recent exotic species of Asian provenance, including the so-called jumping worms. Thus, identification of jumping worms is essentially discerning lumbricid from megascolecid earthworms. Fortunately, there are two relatively conspicuous characters that can be used to discriminate lumbricid and megascolecid earthworms: the setae (body hairs) and clitellum (conspicuous collar used to produce egg cases). Amynthas typically have exactly eight (8) setae (hairs) per segment, often occurring in pairs. In contrast, earthworms typically have very many hairs, which occur continuously around the body in the middle of each segment. The clitellum of lumbricid earthworms is more prominent on the dorsal (back) than ventral (belly) side."

For me, in plain English the two noticeable features are the clitellum being close to the head, milky color as opposed to pinkish and is continuously around the body of the Amynthas worm. The biggest problem is their egg cases which they disperse in fall are almost impossible to see in the soil. So be on the look-out now and in the late spring when they hatch. Drop the worms in a container with a little alcohol and water to kill them.

Key Reference for the article:
Chang, C-H, B Snyder, K Szlavecz. 2016. Asian pheretimoid earthworms in North America north of Mexico: An illustrated key to the genera Amynthas, Metaphire, Pithemera, and Polypheretima (Clitellata: Megascolecidae). Zootaxa 4179, 495–529.

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