

Wildlife of the Month - The Earthworm



The father of evolution, Charles Darwin wrote "*There are few animals which have played so important a part in the history of the world than the earthworm.*" This is because the earthworm provides so many important functions that support our ecosystem and has enabled other species to evolve.

This primitive looking creature is essential for:

- Nutrient release because it recycles the nutrients in dead plant debris and then releases the nutrients into the soil
- Soil aeration because it moves soil (even hard impacted soils) and provides an optimal environment for plants and soil microbes to grow
- Flood prevention because it makes drainage holes (burrows) in the soil and allows water to seep into the soil

There are over 25 species of earthworm in the UK, of which there are 3 categories:

1. Surface dwelling or Epigeic earthworms, which live in and eat leaf litter and compost; they are bright red or reddish-brown in colour all over.
2. Shallow dwelling or Endogeic earthworms, which make horizontal burrows in the soil; they are soil feeders and are pale grey, blue or pink coloured.
3. Deep Dwelling or Anecic earthworms, which make permanent vertical burrows in the soil; they produce the worm casts that can be seen on the surface of the ground; they feed on leaves and other plant detritus near the surface and then they pull them deep into the ground; they have dark red or brown heads and paler coloured tails.

Earthworms are a good biological indicator of soil health, the more earthworms in your garden the healthier the environment is for plants to grow. To test this all you need to do is dig a spade depth of soil (20cm³), pull it apart with your hands and gently remove the worms in order to count and identify them if you wish, returning them to their original place once you have finished. The ideal number is 16 worms per spade block. If you have lots of worms it means that you have a great environment for life to grow and thrive.