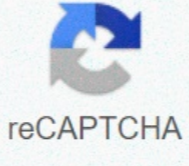




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Worms that eat earthworms

When I was a little boy, I read a funny children’s book called How to Eat Fried Worms. This book was made into a movie in 2006. Billy, the main character, makes a bet that he can eat fifteen worms in fifteen days. The worms get cooked up in all sorts of interesting ways and as it becomes certain that Billy will win the bet the boys he placed the bet with try to make the challenge harder and harder. But, as a parent, you’d ask: Is this safe? Can people eat worms? Billy’s parents asked the doctor, and then took it in stride, even helping him. The Western World sees worms as disgusting and inedible. They are something that lives in waste and eats into your brain after you die. They are potent enough to have been a lynch-pin in the portrayal of fast food as dirty and evil, and legends of the McWorm Burger forced McDonald’s to print full-page ads in newspapers on the West Coast, where the legend was most active (discussed below). If you’ve ever bought a small bucket of nightcrawlers for bait, though, you’d know that beef is a whole lot cheaper and McDonald’s would not make money off a worm burger. Meal worms, the larval form of the meal worm beetle, or Tenebrio molitor, which is also a perfectly edible by humans, and used in some cultures, have also been said to have been a protein source in McDonald’s burgers. Again, this would make for one expensive burger. Earthworms doing earthworm stuff in compost pile.YUM! In Consuming the Inedible: Neglected Dimensions of Food Choice, the authors recount an American folk song, which apparently came from a 1930’s cartoon called “Minnie the Moocher;” where the miserable European immigrant child sang : I know what I’ll do by and by/I’ll eat some worms, and then I’ll die!And when I’m gone, just wait you see!They’ll all be sorry that they picked on me And then another children’s song: Nobody loves me!Everybody hates me!Think I’ll go eat worms The worms crawl in!The worms crawl out!They eat your guts!And spit them out So, eating worms, as far as these chants are concerned, is eating the inedible, not only as a rebellious act, but as suicidal one. And lots of kids, similar to Billy, have eaten a worm on a dare, or even gotten one shoved down their throat by bullies. To no ill effects. If worms weren’t such a symbol, the gummy worm would never have been so successful! But this is a hangup of the West. People in other parts of the world eat worms, grubs, and insects, not as a matter of survival, but with enthusiasm. The fact is that all species of earthworms are edible by humans. They are considered a delicacy by the Maoris of New Zealand. They even make them into pies in Japan. They are eaten also in parts of Africa, New Guinea, and, it is believed, South America. In the Philippines, the Perionyx excavatus species is bred in vegetable waste and then processed with herbs and seasoning to make steaklets for humans to eat. There was also a food supplement called Eugeton, made out of cultured African Nightcrawlers. They have also been used for medicinal purposes. Earthworms may also be a valuable source of high protein food for livestock, and of course, they are fish food. Pygmy Chimpanzees regularly eat earthworms, as well, but it is hard to understand why. They will dig for them, by hand, for hours, and they do not get a lot for such a labor-intensive and long foraging session. Perhaps even more weird is the fact that they hardly seem to chew them at all, and the worms remain intact in the feces. They probably do not get much nutrition from them so perhaps they like the feel of them slivering down their throats! Bonobos and Gorillas eat them as well, but I have found no reference as to whether they chew them or not. But if you were to chew, the earthworm, pound for pound, is packed with protein, at 82% of the body weight of the worm. You’ll also be eating the decaying organic matter inside them. They eat soil, which is ground in a gizzard, and then the waste is ejected as a casting out their rear end. These castings are used to line the burrow or are deposited at the entrance. Anything in the soil, including pesticides and parasites, could be inside the worm. Safety Concerns Earthworms harbor infectious parasites. Our canine friends sometimes like to munch on them, but note that it is dangerous dangerous for dogs to eat earthworms. If there are pesticides in the soil, they will be in the worm. And of course, any bacteria, etc. So, you may want to think twice before rushing to the backyard to forage for earthworms to nibble on and if you may want to try to stop your dog from eating them, if possible. Generally, when earthworms are eaten, the soil is first removed from the gut of the worms and they are cooked by boiling, baking, or other cooking method to a temperature that is sufficient to kill most parasites. I’ve caught many a bluegill like this. We call them brim. And they love earthworms. Are Nightcrawlers Edible? Large and robust earthworms known as nightcrawlers are the most common type of earthworm in the United States and they are as edible as any other earthworm. Their scientific name is actually Lumbricus terrestris. In Britain this is called the lob worm or common earthworm, and in Europe it might be called simply the red worm. In Canada they are called the dew worm or Granddaddy Earthworm. Ironically, the “common” nightcrawler in North America is an invasive, introduced species. In fact, a great many of the earthworms found in the United States, 45 to 60 species or more, were introduced. The nightcrawler, the largest of these invasive earthworms, came to North America with European settlers, along with others, beginning in the 16th century. These worms probably arrived in the soil used as ballast on ships, or on the root balls of plants. They continued to arrive with imported ornamental plants, but also as intentional and permitted importations of live bait into the U.S from Canada.& If you are old enough to remember that old commercial jingle on the TV show WKRP, you know another of the most common introduced species: “Red wrigglers, the Cadillac of worms!” Red wrigglers were what were usually sold as bait or for composting, when I was growing up in the South...at least as far as I can remember, and we sometimes found them in the ground. But the nightcrawler was by far the most plentiful, and was easier to find, especially when it was growing dark, at which time they come closer to the surface. We usually think of earthworms as beneficial to the soil, however, these invasive species can be destructive when introduced into areas where earthworms did not exist before, especially in forests, where there decomposing action on the leaf litter can alter the ecology in such a way as to make the environment unsuitable for certain trees and plants. Earthworms do not normally spread very quickly if left to their own devices, but they are easily helped along by humans, such as fishermen who dump leftover bait worms onto the ground. Worm Burger Controversy When I was a kid, maybe around the time I was reading How to Eat Fried Worms, there was an urban legend circulating: McDonald’s hamburgers were made with ground worms, meaning, of course, earthworms. In fact, the rumor originally started about Wendy’s but was switched to McDonalds, since the chain was so much larger. More recently, in 2012, a Russian woman claimed that her McDonald’s hamburger was full of worms. This was never substantiated and, of course, the urban legend about ground worm burgers is just a myth. It plays on the image of fast food as garbage that is destructive to our bodies. Worms are a symbol of both waste and inner rot, a perfect metaphor for the perception that fast food franchises knowingly sell us dangerous food. A ground worm burger, as you can see from reading this, would not cause such controversy everywhere in the world. McDonald’s in some countries might be able to develop just such a burger! (Additional sources:) You may also be interested: Are Grasshoppers Edible? This article contains one or more Amazon affiliate links. See full disclosure. You May Be Interested in These Articles If you’re looking for another reason to eat fresh and eat healthy, this may be it! Worms can eat pretty much any organic matter that was once living, which encompasses a lot of healthy food such as fruits, vegetables and grains! That’s a pretty good incentive to buy fruits and vegetables more often. Not only is it great for your health, it provides food for your small wiggly friends as well. One small problem some people run into is not having the appropriate food for their worms and trying to feed them food scraps on the non-approved list! If your eating habits include more processed food than organic food, then you may find some difficulty in coming up with enough organic matter to feed your red worms. We’d be talking about meats, dairy foods and processed foods of epic proportions here and an almost utter absence of fruits and veggies, so you probably don’t fall into this category! Perhaps the household in which a worm farm would thrive the most and find the greatest abundance of food is one that is vegetarian! This isn’t to say that people should avoid meats or dairy, or yummy desserts for that matter, but worms love organic food scraps so it’s always good to have a little on hand, and most people do. The more fresh fruits and veggies scraps you’re able to feed your worms, the better. Otherwise, your worms will have to settle for a steady diet of coffee grounds, dead flowers, newspaper and cardboard. That doesn’t sound too appetizing does it? We’d like to quickly go over some of the food scraps that should NOT be fed to worms. Familiarize yourself with them and you’ll quickly gain a good sense of what types of foods worms like and what types they don’t. Worms are like men, you see, the quickest way to their heart is through their stomach. But, you have to know what kind of food they like in order to do that! Worms live in a condensed, confined area so it’s important to keep their environment free of certain types of food that they don’t like to eat or can harm them. For instance, the pH levels of the bin cannot become too acidic or it will harm the worms. Also, worms must breathe through their skin and certain types of food will irritate that process. Other foods will stink up real bad when thrown into a compost and that can attract rats and other vermin. These are just some of the reasons you should avoid putting the following food scraps into your worm composting bin: Meats, bones, fat and anything oily or greasy. Dairy products including butter, sour cream, milk, whole eggs (egg shells are ok) and cheese. Canned sauces, peanut butter and other processed food. Citrus foods like lemons, limes and oranges. Onions and garlic. Spicy foods such as hot peppers. Yard trimmings that have been treated with pesticides. Plastic, metals, glass or other non-biodegradable items. Soap Paper that has a glossy finish or colored ink Poison ivy, oak or sumac or other poisonous plants. If you have a worm farm, and especially if you have a larger-scale vermicomposting system , then buying plenty of fresh fruits and veggies will do you AND your worms a lot of good! Always remember your worms when shopping at the grocery store! Australian flatworm on left of picture All my articles, videos and work are funded by my teaching and sales of award winning bumblebee nest boxes, solitary bee boxes, and wormeries. Earthworm predators in the UK Many vertebrate and invertebrate animals consume earthworms. Their inclusion in a diet will depend on many reasons such as : availability, opportunism, season, life cycle of predator and food shortages of their preferred foods. Here is a UK wildlife selection.....there are many more species! Australian Flatworm (Photographed with branding) Badgers Birds: robins, blackbirds, song thrushes, starlings, woodcocks, curlews, gulls, crows Carabid beetles e.g. black ground beetle Centipedes Foxes Frogs Grass snake Hedgehogs Leeches (e.g. Trocheta subviridis) Lizards Mice Minks Moles Newts New Zealand Flatworm Pigs Pine Martins Red foxes Shrews Slow worm Smooth snake Staphylind sp. (rove beetles) Stoats Toads Wild boar Wood ants (unless they live in the wood ants nests!) and.....SLUGS!!!! Carnivorous slugs!! Believe it or not, there are at least 3 specimens of slugs that feast on earthworms here in Britain! They belong to the Testacella family of slugs..... Spider eating worm!!!! A most unusual search of the scientific literature found a species of spider, in Switzerland feeding on an earthworm, with a photograph of it trying to pull the worm on to its web! See it for yourself and download..... Spiders feeding on earthworms Some species of parasites and pathogens also attack, infest or infect earthworms..... Bacteria, Fungi, Mites, Nematodes, Parasitic fly larvae, Platyhelminths worms, Protozoa and Rotifers. Refs: Beside my own experiences and observations; Edwards C.A. & Bohlen P.J., (1996). “ Biology and ecology of Earthworms”, Chapman & Hall, London Laakso J. & Setälä H., (1997). “ Nest mounds of red wood ants (Formica aquilonia) hot spots for litter dwelling earthworms”. Oecologia 111, p 565-569 Updated November 22, 2019 By Leslie Renico The earthworm is classified as a small scavenger with a lifetime of 80 days. Interestingly, earthworms have a gestation period that takes just about an entire lifetime, but when they do hatch their young, they are born 50 at a time. The average weight of an earthworm is 5 grams. Many different animals prey on earthworms, which is one reason why they spend so much time burrowing into and around the dirt. A variety of small carnivores feed on earthworms when they come out of the ground. This includes animals like weasels, stoats, otters, mink and frogs. Spiders are just about the only small carnivore that does not feed on earthworms. Medium-sized omnivores (animals that eat animals and plants) also eat earthworms. Pigs and raccoons are two of the most common examples. Just about all small and medium-sized birds will eat earthworms. American robins and woodcocks are two species indigenous to North America that focus on earthworms and insects in their diet. The Eastern worm snake is just one of the species of snakes that will eat earthworms. Also, turtles and frogs will eat them as they forage. Other members of this group include centipedes and toads.

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