This article is in memory of our friend
Dr. Warren Kirkley (Copyright 2006, The Gazette;
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FROM THE GROUND UP
a WORM welcome

By BILL REED THE GAZETTE

Earthworms have a thankless job. They toil in anonymity
under the ground. They never see the beautiful plants their
work helps to produce. And, to top it off, humans think they’re
gross.

Until about 1881, people poisoned worms in the mistaken
belief that they were small snakes.

If only Dr. Warren Kirkley had been around back then. How
many innocent worms might have been spared?

No doubt he would have tried to stop the slaughter, since
Kirkley is a diehard worm advocate. He has a miniature worm
farm on his property in Black Forest, with about 10,000 red
wiggler worms crawling around in a 10-by-6-foot plastic tub,
and he carries business cards that read “Dr. Warren’s Worms.”

He swears by the power of worm castings (manure) as na-
ture’s best fertilizer, and the importance of having lots of the
creatures wiggling through your garden to create living soil.

“Without worms we wouldn’t be here,” he says as he pulls
up a thick insulation blanket to reveal dark, moist dirt teeming
with wriggly red worms. “Agriculture is dependent upon

wheels. Worms are the No. 1 source for breaking down organic
material.”

The benefits are numerous, he says. Worm castings:
♦ Act as nature’s fertilizer and soil conditioner;
♦ Contain nutrients vital to plant growth in a ready-to-
use form;
♦ Are slow-release and don’t burn plants;
♦ Help retain moisture in soil;
♦ Promote beneficial microorganisms in soil;
♦ Are virtually odorless;
♦ And work at any temperature.

Perhaps it was inevitable that Kirkley would develop a deep
admiration for the humble worm. He is a retired veterinarian
and a lifelong gardener with a penchant for growing award-
winning roses, so he understands what worms can do for soil
and how they do it, the tangible effects on his roses and the
underlying chemical reactions.

Kirkley graduated from veterinary school at Colorado State
University in 1955 and went into practice near Denver. He also
began growing roses a half-century ago and won his first
“Queen of Show” honor at an American Rose Society event in
1966.

Kirkley eventually migrated to Colorado Springs and ran the
Eagle Point Veterinary Clinic until he retired in 1998. With
more free time, he got even more serious about his plants and
committed himself to organic gardening — no chemical fertil-
erizers. That’s when he began to study worms.

Soon, he was checking out books from the library and send-
ing away for the equipment to start his own worm farm.

He settled on red wigglers (Eisenia fetida) because they re-
produce quickly, allowing him to build a big worm colony. He
says the worms, which live on a diet of horse manure, compost
and water, are less hassle than the dogs and cats he’s cared for.

Kirkley’s wife, Betty, says she rips up newspaper and
blends the kitchen waste to feed “Doctor’s” worms. And in a
workshop next to the garage, woodworking equipment is
pushed aside to make room for sorting and bagging worm cast-
ings.

Kirkley has developed a missionary zeal on behalf of the
worm. He gives presentations to garden clubs. He shares
worms with friends. He’s busy packaging worm castings to sell
to all comers. And a valve on the bottom of the worm tub al-
 lows Kirkley to collect “worm tea” (urine) to water his roses.

His results speak for themselves. At the 2005 Pikes Peak
Rose Society show, Kirkley entered roses in nine categories.
He won six first places, two seconds and a third place, and one
of his roses won Best of Show across all categories from
among the 200-plus entries.
WORMS (Continued from page 3)

Kirkley's secret is in the soil.

"By itself, the soil here is lousy," he says.

In his garden beds, he uses 30 percent to 40 percent of the existing soil, then adds organic material, which includes worm castings. Kirkley says the additions attract more worms, and the worms help the soil by loosening it up and leaving natural fertilizer in their wake. The result is sturdier plants, better blossoms and, he says, better tasting fruits and vegetables.

"Worms are nature's way of conditioning soil. It's really amazing what they do," he says. "And the worm manure is very high in the natural chemicals required for plant growth."

Kirkley's rule of thumb: If you turn over a shovel full of dirt in the garden, it should contain 25 worms. If there are fewer than 10 worms, "you have trouble because you can't grow much of anything."

Some local gardeners attest to the power of Kirkley's worm castings.

At a lecture he said 'Just try a little bit of it on your indoor plants and you'll see growth within a week,' and I thought 'OK, we'll see,'" says Pam Hamamoto, president of the Horticultural Art Society of Colorado Springs.

She got some worm castings from Kirkley and put less than a tablespoon on each of her 50-plus indoor plants. The skeptic was converted.

I did it and, man, within a week, everything that could bloom was blooming. It was amazing. I'm becoming a real believer."

She says her herbs are going crazy. Her inherited tomato plant has come back from the dead to push out some late blooms. Next, she's going to turn loose the worm castings on some outdoor plants that need help.

Hamamoto has seen potting soils for sale with worm castings mixed in, but she's more impressed with the pure castings.

"I kind of like getting the straight poop, so to speak, from a local boy," she says.

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DETAILS

♦ For house plants, he recommends 1 part worm castings to 5 parts potting soil.
♦ For outdoor beds, he recommends spreading the worm castings on the surface, working them in, then thoroughly watering. His formula for the perfect planting medium is: 25-45 percent soil; 10-20 percent compost; 10-20 percent sphagnum peat moss; 20-30 percent manure (preferably horse), and 5 percent worm castings.

If you're interested in starting your own worm family, small worm farms can be kept under the sink (they are odorless). Many websites offer supplies to start a worm farm.

Harry Lauder's Walking Stick
by Carolyn Proeber (Article taken from GardenGuides.com) and Copyright by Carolyn Proeber

Gardens celebrate the growing season with covering of foliage, flowers, and leaves. However, there are growing things, which really look their best in their winter nudity.

One of the most bizarre trees is Harry Lauder's Walking Stick (Corylus Avellana 'Contorta'). It grows with what are allegedly flowers. The catkins, which hang all over it all winter, looks like dead chicken feet with no bones. In the summer it sprouts smallish crinkly crepe paper leaves that sort of shiver and look cranky. Characterized as a large shrub, the Walking Stick can grow up to 20 feet high and wide, though most specimens are slow growing and are from 2 to 5 feet high. The curly branches of the Walking Stick are truly lovely, and they are pretty in arrangements.

(Photo from GardenGuides.com: web page)