

**On Being a Farm Wife**  
(and other hazards)  
**Joyce Bupp**



They're busy plowing. Earthworms, not farmers. Though some of them are plowing, too.

Unlike us human tillers of the soil, worms don't hitch up the horsepower—four-legged or four-wheel-drive—to a series of shiny, steel moldboards to turn the soil over. They just sort of chew their way through, more or less in a grazing mode.

I noticed the worms' work one recent damp morning, on the bare ground just off the front porch. Because of our big, old maple trees around the house, and their aggressive root systems which prevent anything else growing beneath them except for some occasional weeds, the porch is surrounded mostly by bare ground.

But the normally flat, bare soil

had erupted with clusters of bumpy hills of soil around small holes in the ground. Worm tracks, if you will.

As a young child, I HATED worms. Though I don't personally remember the squabbles, Mom has often related how my sister, Elaine, would chase me around with a worm, while I screamed at the top of my small—but highly-vocal—lungs. Long ago, I outgrew that terror of wiggly and bug-like critters and now share with my sister our whole family's love of gardening and digging in the ground where worms live.

Much of my respect and admiration for worms came from learning to appreciate how valuable they are to that precious resource of all farmers and gardeners (and everyone who likes to eat, for that mat-

ter). As they munch their way through the underground, dining at microscopic buffet tables piled full of tasty things worms like to eat, they leave little tunnels behind everywhere they go. Conveniently, those little trails help aerate the soil and open it up. That helps our April showers that bring May flowers to more easily trickle down to their roots, where the moisture can most readily be used.

Worms also leave behind their waste material known as "castings." Scientists praise those little clumps of rich, recycled soil as incredibly useful for improving the soil's organic composition, texture and workability.

Actually, worms are such valuable little workaholics that I now rescue those occasional little wrigglers that inadvertently crawl toward their own destruction. During stretches of drippy, damp weather, we often find them on the porches, the garage's concrete floor, even the laundry area in the back portion of our basement. They crawl there escaping oversaturated ground and then become stranded as the area around them dries out. If not put back out on the ground, they will soon die.

Earthworms serve three other, extremely useful purposes. Breakfast. Lunch. And dinner.

Mother Nature conveniently unearths worms—pardon the pun—from their winter hiding just about the same time the robins return in spring. It's fascinating to watch a robin stalk those underground crawlers out across the lawn. These perky, rusty-breasted birds will hop along through the greening grass, suddenly halt, heads cocked and then launch a split-second, sharp-beak attack on the unseen prey.

Do they hear the worms? Smell

them? Feel the vibrations of their wiggling underground? How ever they do it, robins rack up an enviable success rate snagging those unseen, high-nutrient tidbits.

Some food extremists claim worms make great people-food, too. Nutrition-wise, they may. Appeal wise.....no thanks, I'm not hungry.

So celebrate the season. Take a worm to lunch.

Or invite it to go fishing.



**'Wild' License Plates**

(Continued from Page B4)

"We have very little information on old-growth forest ecosystems," Schaadt explains. "Pennsylvania and three other states have what is likely the largest stands of virgin timber left in the eastern United States. If we know how old-growth systems function, then we can better manage the timber that is just now maturing. It takes about 400 years to make an old-growth forest and if we make a mistake it will be another 400

years before it can be fixed."

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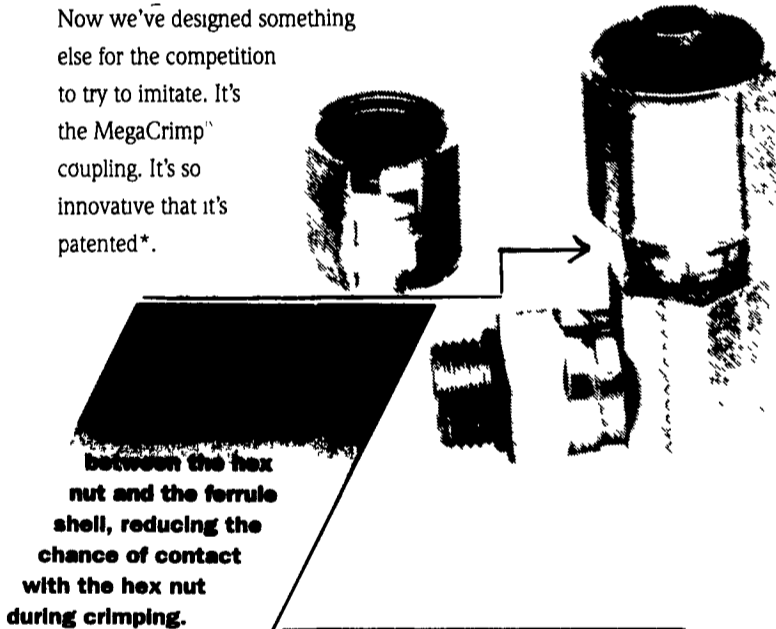
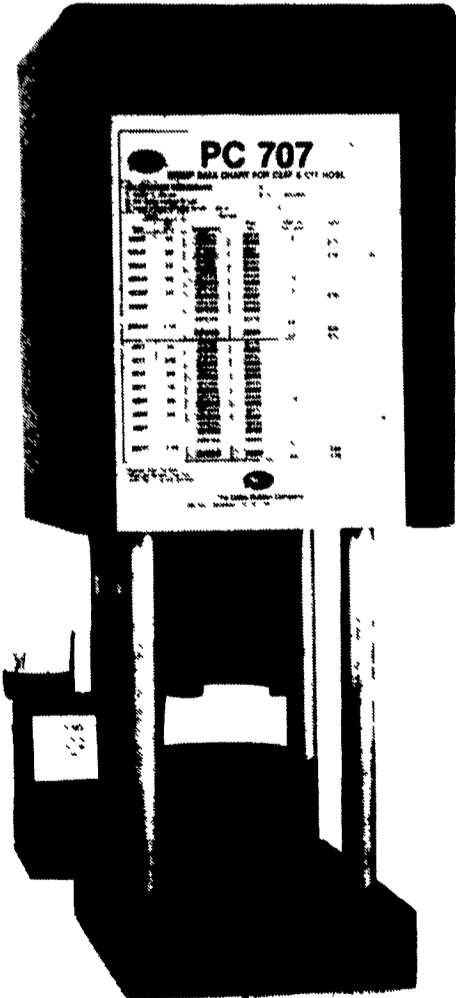
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