

Wackier things have come in the mail.

Maybe.

Like most folks, our mailbox fills with the routine contingent of bills, the unfortunately-less-frequent checks, never-ending credit card offers, wastebaskets full of junk mail and charitable solicitations with "gift" address labels enclosed (for which we are expected to ante up a donation, except that they are now incorrect since we've been issued a street number.)

Some of the most useful things which turn turn up via the postal service's delivery come courtesy of assorted advertising creativity.

There are pens, pencils, and markers flying around the office with our name on them, sent by outfits hoping to entice us to order them for giveaways. Ditto for pocket date books, usually coming toward the end of the year and including some really handy ones sporting nifty little blurbs of humor on each page. Also useful are packets of "sticky notes" on which we scribble message over the advertising and thus distribute the sender's

message far and wide on our own communications.

But we don't often get worms in the mail.

The worm was not really that much of a surprise. After all, the colorful outside of the soil booster promotional material bore assorted crop pictures and fat, healthy earthworms. One didn't need much of a clue to figure the telltale long, narrow bump in the package was a replica.

And a very realistic one at that, by golly.

Six inches long, the limp, plastic earthworm was a light pinkish-beige at one end, shaded to a medium brown at the other. Even with the classic body bump and reddish spot marking... something or another I should remember from tenth-grade biology class when we dissected those slimy, formaldehyde-laced critters. I never did understand why dissecting a worm was necessary to get a diploma.

Anyway, The Farmer and I looked at each other across the plastic worm and voiced an identical thought; "Josh (our three-year-old grandson) will love this for fishing."

Similar advertising gimmicks several years ago had delivered an object of a related, though slightly more distasteful, ilk—a chubby, white, incredibly-realistic, cornworm grub. Our then-teenaged son promptly pronounced the plastic grub ideal bait for teasing the fat bass in the pond and added it to an already bizarre assortment of fish-lores, including gummy-plastic worms in shades of glo purple, brilliant tangerine, and lime green.

Though it probably generated lots of belly laughs from the fish, the neon-bright bait never had the drawing power of the real thing. But this new addition on the kitchen counter was the "realest" imitation earthworm I had ever seen.

Had it arrived in our mail when I was but a kid, it would have generated shrieks and screams from one youthful worm-hater. Family tales relate how my sister would chase me with earthworms until I was hollering so loud the neighbors beyond the hill could hear me. Earthworm-phobia was conquered as an older kid interested in gardening, I can even bait my own fishing hook with them, thank you.

That, however, is a painful thing for me to do.

Because earthworms are a treasure. And should be to anyone who values the land or likes to eat. These lowly critters eat up waste and convert it into rich, organic soil matter. In the process, they aerate and open up the ground, easing the way for moisture and roots to penetrate. Then they give up their lives to feed birds, including the cheerful robins, a worthy life-contri-

bution in itself.

So, I value earthworms enough to retrieve stranded ones from rain-soaked porches, damp basement floors and homemade potting soil mix, and return them to the outside where they can get back to work.

But there are no qualms about using an imitation one

to help a grandson catch a fish, so this realistic-looking earthworm will go into the tackle box until summer. And remain well-hidden from accidental find by the robins.

Any early bird who gets the worm deserves better than a beakful of plastic for its effort.

New 4-H Curriculum Generates Energy

NEWARK, Del. — Children's faces, as well as light bulbs, soon will be lighting up as Delaware 4-H'ers begin using the Electric Excitement project book, one of a series that is hot off the presses.

Fun, hands-on activities abound in the colorful new curricula, developed cooperatively by the National 4-H Council and Extension specialists across the nation.

In this busy world of sensory overload, kids and parents need meaningful hands-on learning experiences that also challenge the mind. Delaware 4-H is meeting the need with six new major curriculum products introduced for the 1998 4-H program year. The project areas are: aerospace, electricity, entomology, health, theater arts, and woodworking.

A key concept in the curricula is hand-on involvement — learning by doing. The experiential learning model encourages learning by trial and error to enable youth to develop competence and a sense of self-worth. 4-H leaders guide children through a process of analyzing their hand-on experiences and

applying the skills learned to other parts of their lives.

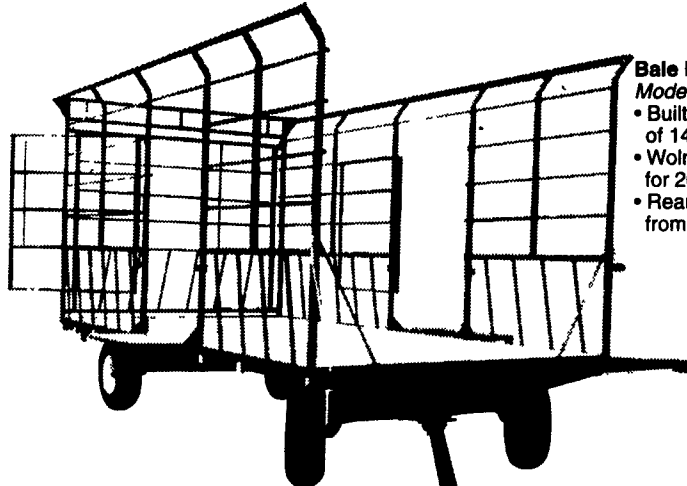
A helper's guide accompanies the youth manuals, giving information on how leaders can work effectively with each age group and outlining activities such as bingo, game shows and public performances that will hold children's attention.

In the project book for health, for instance, children apply a glow-in-the-dark hand cream to their hands and then attempt to wash it off. Viewing their hands under a black light, they can see what's left of the fluorescent substance — the "pretend" germs. This activity gives them a dramatic lesson in the importance of thorough hand-washing and how germs are spread.

The new curricula are available for use in schools, school-age child-care sites and community centers as well as 4-H groups. Leader training also is offered. For more information, contact your county 4-H Extension educator. In New Castle County, call Mark Manno (302)831-COOP; in Kent County, Ted Palmer at (302)697-4000; and in Sussex County, Mary Argo (302)856-7303.

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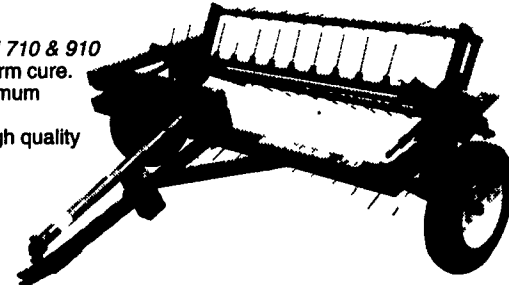


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