

Weekly Zoo Article – March 28, 2008  
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Warmer weather is on the way, or already here depending on the day. With the warming of the weather, comes lots of yard work and clearing of garden beds. This is an excellent time to take stock of the beneficial creatures in these planting areas.

Many people are a bit squeamish about the “creepy crawlies” that are found under leaves and logs, but many of these animals are a great benefit to you as a gardener and to your plants. As a part of our education program animal collection, we have a relative of one many-legged animal you may find under leaves. A millipede.

The type of millipede we have in our collection hails from Africa. They measure upwards of 10 inches and are dark brown to black. They eat rotting vegetation in the wild and here at the zoo they receive a mix of fruits and veggies with a dusting of a special vitamin. Chalk is also provided to help them keep their exoskeletons strong. Like all millipedes, they have several body segments, and each segment has two pairs of legs. Although milli means thousand, rarely do these animals actually have a thousand legs. If you want to know the actual number, count the body segments and multiply by four.

According to the Kansas Department of Agriculture, there are three types of millipedes found in Kansas. Each one feeds on decaying plant material, but they range in size from an inch to 4 inches. Each has a cylindrical or rounded body. To help guests understand their function, I have described them as an above ground, many-legged equivalent of the earthworm.

Pillbugs or rolypollies are often abundant under logs and bricks that may border your yard or gardens. They also consume decaying plant matter, but are not relatives of the millipede. Believe it or not, these animals are more closely related to crayfish and shrimp than insects!

Sometimes this next animal is confused with the millipede, but they are quite different. A centipede has a flattened, but still segmented, body. They have one pair of legs per segment. One of the most important differences to know is that centipedes eat other animals. To help them catch and consume their prey they have a strong and venomous bite. These also range in size from small to up to 6 inches. Although they could pose a risk to humans if threatened into biting, unless you have an allergy to their venom it should be no worse than a bee sting. This animal is extremely important to your yard. They eat many of the unwanted or pest insects that may threaten the overall health of your flower or garden bed.

As you clean leaves and other debris, you will without a doubt come across a spider or two. Although it can be quite creepy to have one skitter across your hand at an unexpected moment, they are amazing predators in your garden and yard. Spiders are venomous, but most would rather run from you than stage an attack and risk being hurt in the process. Although spiders historically have gotten a bad rap, they are a huge asset to the maintenance of a pest free garden.

When you start to dig, hopefully you will find earthworms. Earthworms are a good indicator of healthy, organic rich soil. One of the amazing things about the anatomy of an earthworm is that each segment is sealed from those around it. That is one of the reasons why if you break an earthworm, it can survive. As long as the clitellum (that pinker saddle towards the head) is attached the animal can regenerate lost segments. The section that no longer has the clitellum will die. As earthworms move through the dirt, they may consume fungus, bacteria, small bits of organic matter, or other small components of the soil. After digesting the food, they contribute to the health of the soil by re-depositing organic material back into the soil. Did you know that instead of one heart they have 5 aortic arches? Or, that each earthworm has both male and female reproductive organs?

As the season continues to warm you will continue to see more and more invertebrates emerge in your yard and gardens. Many of these are beneficial, and some are not. If you encourage beneficial creatures, your need for insecticides will diminish (keep in mind that insecticides will kill both the good and bad bugs, and the bad ones tend to come back faster). It is an amazing time to see not only plants, but also small animals come to life throughout your yard. Watch for emerging lady beetles, praying mantids, katydids and more. If you want to see some of our large inverts up-close, please give us a call to set up a program. Hope to see you outside, exploring everything your yard has to offer.

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