



## Hammerhead Worms—The Bad, The Ugly: Hammerhead worms are hard to eradicate

Gardeners' Dirt by Linda Lees, June 30, 2023



### *Hammerhead Worms*

Contributed photos by Texas Invasive Species Institute

In last weeks Gardener's Dirt column Master Gardener Nelda Hensley wrote about the common earth-worm. If there is any such a thing as royalty living beneath our feet it is those little guys that ramp up the nutrients in our soil.

#### **Big bad worms that don't go away**

While there are untold numbers of these beneficials helping us grow beautiful flowers and vegetables, there are areas in our state experiencing an ongoing invasion of flathead worms. Along with its smaller cousin, the New Guinea flathead, the hammerhead worm has become a real nightmare.

## **Cannibals that kill earthworms**

Flatheads are unique because they are the only invertebrate known to produce tetrodotoxin, the same poison found in the deadly pufferfish. Although they produce a tiny amount of the toxin, it is enough to kill its prey and thwart all predators. Population containment is almost impossible.

The hammerhead's only goal in life is survival and to do that it must consume earthworms. They are a real threat if you happen to be a gardener or worm farmer. Once they kill off the earthworms where they are, these cannibals will devour each other while marching to another location.

## **They've found a home in Texas**

In Texas the most common hammerhead species is the *Bipalium kewense*. They came from Asia with imported plants and were discovered in the United States around 1901. About 35 years ago they spread to Texas due a preference for warmer, moist climates.

The hammerhead has invaded a number of Texas counties, but they have not been reported in Victoria County, according to Matt Bochat, Victoria County AgriLife Extension agent.

That's not saying they aren't already here. To seek out these worms you may find them above ground or on a sidewalk following a heavy rain. Nocturnal by nature, they like to live in mulch and leaf litter.

## **There's a right way to kill**

If you think you have spotted one, or for that matter any suspicious looking worm, resist the urge to smush it. Another thing you don't want to do is pick it up with your fingers.

In addition to all of the bad things written about flatheads they also carry nematode parasites, and their toxic mucous excretion may result in an allergic skin irritation. According to the Texas Invasive Species Institute, they generally are not seriously harmful to humans or pets. Nevertheless, direct contact should be avoided.

When attempting eradication, special measures should be taken not only for safety reasons but for proper identification and tracking. If you do touch one be sure to wash your hands in warm soapy water. Using a hand sanitizer wouldn't hurt either.

## **Where to report a sighting**

To report a sighting, first take a photo of the specimen. Using a stick, gloves or paper towel place the worm into sealed plastic bag. Apply salt or vinegar and place the bag in the freezer for 48 hours to ensure a kill. Deposit the bag in the trash.

Send the photo to your local extension agent or the Texas Invasive Species Institute. The Victoria County Office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, 528 Waco Circle, may be reached by calling [361-575-4581](tel:361-575-4581) for details. A photo may be emailed to TISI at [invasives@shsu.edu](mailto:invasives@shsu.edu).

Once you have made your report your job is just beginning. If there is one hammerhead there are more. With each encounter they must be bagged, killed and trashed.

Keep on the lookout. We need scouts to help eradicate hammerhead worms.



### *Hammerhead Worm in the Woodlands*

Contributed photos by Texas Invasive Species Institute

*The Gardener's Dirt is written by members of the Victoria County Master Gardener Association, an educational outreach of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Victoria County. Mail your questions in care of the Advocate, P.O. Box 1518, Victoria, TX 77901; or [vcmg@vicad.com](mailto:vcmg@vicad.com), or comment on this column at [Victoria Advocate.com](http://VictoriaAdvocate.com).*

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