

CREEPY CRAWLY IN THE GARDEN

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With all of the rain we have been having, residents are beginning to observe a certain creepy crawly critter in our area. I have seen this organism before, but it seems to be becoming more common. In fact, I just recently saw several of these elongated creatures behind our office silently gliding across a walkway. The creature that I am speaking of is called the land planarian. Remember the aquatic planarians from high school biology classes that looked almost like small neck ties? These planarians are similar, but larger and inhabit the land. This terrestrial flatworm is not native to Florida and has a taste for earthworms. Let's take a closer look at this slimy garden resident.

To see this odd flatworm sliding along the ground, you might think that it was from outer space! Originally from Southeast Asia, land planarians have spread around to different parts of the world via the human movement of plants. The land planarian can range from one to 11 inches long and can easily stretch and contract at will. The head of this particular species is crescent-shaped with a dark stripe running down the length of its back. The overall color of this worm is greenish-grey to brown. The land planarian requires high humidity and moist areas to survive and can be found under rocks, logs, shrubs and even out in the open when it rains. These flatworms glide on a layer of mucus as their means of getting around.

While land planarians will eat slugs, insect larvae and each other, they also favor the taste of earthworms. They trap their prey with mucus and then feed on the entangled victim. Their taste for earthworms has made them an unwanted guest at earthworm farms for obvious

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- ① A land planarian, *Bipalium kewense* Moseley.
- ② Adult flatworm, *Dolichoplana striata* Moseley.
- ③ Planarian, *Bipalium kewense* Moseley, feeding on earthworm.



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reasons. These planarians have reportedly been able to eat their way through earthworm populations in some areas of the world.

While land planarians do produce eggs, most of their reproduction occurs when pieces of their body break off and develop new individual worms. Called fragmentation, one planarian can produce one or two fragments and subsequently new planarians, per month.

Most predators don't like the taste of land planarians and thus there are few enemies of this creature. Since they are cannibalistic, however, land planarians may keep their own population in check to some degree. If you have not seen one

already, check early in the morning or at night when they are actively moving and feeding. Slime trails may also provide evidence of their travels as well.

Really no more than an interesting curiosity unless you are a worm farmer, land planarians are here. Once you have seen one of these unique slime trailers, you will not forget them!

Resources:

- Choate, P.M. & Dunn, R.A. (2006) *Land Planarians, Bipalium kewense Moseley and Doli-choplana striata Moseley*. UF/IFAS Extension Service.

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For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant Allison Turner at 764.4351 or email Allison.Turner@CharlotteFL.com.

Allison can help educate you about the FYN Program so you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

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