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There's a busy other world under your healthy lawn

That surface of green between your house and the curb may seem quiet and still, but there is an entire community of life in a healthy lawn. It is its own ecosystem, made up of bacteria and insects such as earthworms, mites, ants, millipedes, snails and grubs.

Some of the members of this ecosystem (like earthworms, insects and rodents) are large enough to see. Others, the microorganisms, are invisible without a microscope. There may be as many as 100 million to 15 billion microorganisms per spoonful of soil. In a 1,000-square-foot plot, you could find 70 pounds of microorganisms. By combining the micro with the visible organisms, you could have 200 to 450 pounds of living organisms beneath your feet in this thousand-square-foot plot.

The organic matter in the soil (remnants of dead grass, leaves and applied compost) gives life to the soil because it serves as food for the microorganisms. As these lawn tenants eat and expel waste, their activities enrich the soil. Their movements through the soil improve the soil structure and helps plant growth.

Fauna (Animal Species)

Earthworms stir up the soil, improving aeration and the movement of water into the soil. The average well-established lawn has 20,000 worms per 1,000 square feet; these worms will eat undecomposed organic matter and generate 40 pounds of worm castings a year. The castings are an important source of plant nutrients.

Insects (millipedes, centipedes, ants, grubs, mites, slugs and snails) also inhabit the soil. These species feed mostly on decaying vegetation (although some will consume living plants), and through the process of their daily activities, help aerate and fertilize the soil.

Nematodes are small eel worms, usually a few millimeters to a centimetre or two in length. The population of nematodes per 1,000 square feet could vary from 4,000 to 20 million. The most common type live on decaying organic matter.

Microscopic protozoa are the most elementary form of animal life and are the most plentiful of all fauna found in the soil. There could be from 300 million to one billion per pound of soil. They live on bacteria and, in turn, provide food for higher organisms. When the protozoa consume bacteria, they convert the nitrogen in those bacteria into a form that plants can use.

Flora (Plant Species)

The roots of all larger plants (like grass and trees) occupy the soil along with microscopic forms of plant life. Tiny but mighty, these organisms change and digest the organic matter added to the soil by the higher plants.

There are billions of bacteria per spoonful of soil. Some grow in the absence of organic matter, but the majority of bacteria in the soil derive their energy by decomposing organic matter, and they require oxygen for growth.

See YOUR, pg. 5

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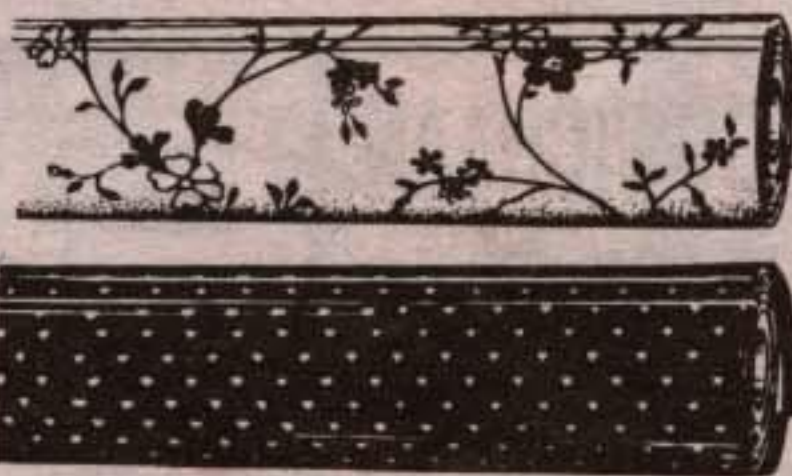


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