

## What Is Eating My Potatoes?

It started as an experiment. I had gone into the spare bedroom to get some canned goods, and noticed the remains of two, long-forgotten bags of potatoes. One contained a few of the russet variety, while the other contained a few red potatoes. All were shriveled, and had numerous long sprouts. I did not want to waste them, and decided to plant them.

The timing was perfect. There are many community gardens in Laramie, and many people share a garden with one or two other people. The garden I use falls into the latter category. A friend, Jim, has beautiful raised bed gardens. We have shared the gardens for two years. I let him know I had potatoes to experiment with, and we proceeded to install them in the garden after cutting each potato into a few pieces.

Initially, the plants were quite large and vigorous. Then they became infected with some sort of blight. We did not expect to harvest any potatoes after that. The end of September came, and Jim decided to do some digging. I was completely surprised when he presented me with half a dozen good sized, red potatoes!

We made arrangements for my husband and I to go dig up the rest of the potato plants. We harvested approximately 20 pounds, (9 kilograms) of tubers. Most were red. Unfortunately, a few of the potatoes appeared to have rotten spots. When I cut a couple open, I saw the reason why.



The “worms” that were damaging the potatoes can be seen in the above photos. Notice the big pocket at the top right of the right photo.

Rather disgusting, if I do say, but curiosity, and the phrase, *I wonder...* are two of my attributes. I took the potato on the right home, and dropped it into a jar of 70% isopropyl alcohol.

I finally made time to further my investigation. The first worm that I observed under my stereoscope was just that, a very tiny common earthworm, *Lumbricus terrestris*. There were many of these worms throughout the raised beds. But it seems the compost rich, nutrient dense soil was also inviting for other creatures.



The next specimen I pulled from the jar was this creature, wrapped around a bit of debris. It was definitely not an earthworm. 20X magnification revealed many legs. All my previous research pointed towards wireworms (*Elateridae*) as the culprits, but with these many legs, this was definitely not a wireworm. More research revealed that it was a Spotted Snake millipede, *Blaniulus guttulatus*. This specimen was just under 10 millimeters long. Others on the potato were slightly larger or smaller. They can grow up to 20 millimeters long.

The eggs are laid in small batches during spring and early summer. The millipedes will over winter, and can take several years to reach maturity. They primarily feed on decomposing organic matter. However, they also find soft fruits, root vegetables such as carrots, onions, and potatoes and other tubers to their liking. How we got them in the garden is a mystery. Because they are long lived, the next step will be to research how to eliminate them.

This was a peculiar year for gardens. We ended up with more zucchini, off of just four plants, than three people could ever use. I cooked with the squash, froze 20 quarts, made multiple kinds of bread, and donated pounds to the local food bank. The peas produced, and produced some more. The tomatoes produced green fruit, but no red. The yellow squash produced a few

fruits. I did learn one can grow potatoes in the very short growing season on the high mountain plains of Laramie, Wyoming, U.S.A.

Despite the little multi-segmented creatures helping themselves to a few potatoes, we are enjoying the end result of the experiment, as shown below!



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