**Beecroft Worm Farm 1950**

**The World’s News (Sydney), Sat 18 Feb 1950**

Now There are Worm Farms.

Australia's most unique farm, where worms are bred by the million for the job of cleaning up the earth and rebuilding old and worn out soil, has been established at Beecroft, near Sydney. Already worms from the farm are working 24 hours a day on properties throughout the Commonwealth.

By ROBIN ATHERTON

No cattle graze on this unusual five-acre farm, no waving corn, or fruit-laden trees bring in a yearly cheque.

The partners who run it spend their days in the city; they are accountants in a business house. And yet people write from all over Australia for its products.

It is Australia's first worm-breeding farm.

The acres of rose bushes planted by a previous owner go untended for the time, for the focal point of the place is a long line of boxes, shaded by Christmas bush, covered by damp bags.

Lift the bags and you find a six-inch layer of sweet-smelling, friable compost and tens of thousands of worms, some of them half-an-inch long, others up to four inches or more.

Sift the earth through your fingers and you will find hundreds of tiny, oval, creamy capsules -worms' eggs - about an eighth of an inch long.

One has to realise the action of worms upon earth to understand why flower growers, exhibitors of prize blooms, orchardists, and wise home gardeners have kept steady orders flowing to the farm of Trevor Higgins since his first small advertisements appeared some months ago.

Each 24 hours a worm absorbs its own weight in soil and stones, grinds them to a fine powder, mixes them with powerful digestive secretions and deposits them near the surface in the form of castings of "earthworm manure."

These castings are five times richer in nitrogen, seven times richer in phosphorus, 11 times richer in potash and three times as rich in magnesium as ordinary topsoil.

Worms burrow down to eight feet below the surface, work 24 hours a day, keep soil friable and honeycombed with millions of tiny passages which enable air and rain to penetrate and be stored.

Soil thoroughly worked by worms will absorb a two-inch rainfall in 15 seconds, while neighbouring soil, untouched by worms, will take up to two hours to absorb the same amount.

It takes Nature up to 5000 years to lay down an inch of topsoil. Sufficient earthworms could build an inch of topsoil in five years.

It is not hard to understand why planes, trains and post take boxes of worms (packed in earth) and cartons of capsules, or eggs (packed in cotton wool) from this unique Beecroft farm to all parts of Australia each week, for wise growers were quick to see the advantages of being able to buy in large quantities, and enrich their land quickly and naturally.

These down to earth laborers will work 24 hours a day rebuilding old and worn-out soil.

Plants flourish in the new, rich soil with the natural minerals no commercial fertiliser can give; hard soil becomes soft, friable, eager to hold moisture down near tender roots.

One batch of Soilmaster worms even went by plane to New Guinea, where an ardent gardener had heard of the venture.

The story of "the worm blokes," as some neighbours call them, started some years ago when accountant John Dransfield, studying the action of worms in building healthy soil, discussed his experiments with Trevor Higgins, a fellow accountant. Higgins, also interested in soil improvement threw a pile of compost and a handful of worms into a dark corner of his Double Bay garage.

In a few weeks the garage was fragrant with an aroma resembling that of orange blossom, the earth was soft and rich, and it was alive with worms.

When the rich new earth was dug into the garden wilting plants strengthened, unenthusiastic fruit trees, flourished.

Together the men built compost pits and searched through books for information on worms and their action on soil.

Charles Darwin spent much of his life studying the earthworm and its place in Nature and recorded his careful findings in The Formation of Vegetable Mould. Agricultural departments in Britain, New Zealand and America had proved the value of worms in soil-building.

A Victorian professor and Miss E. C. Pope, Assistant Curator of the Department of the Invertebrates, Australian Museum, Sydney, were of tremendous assistance. Books like Bromfield's Pleasant Valley and Malabar Farm took the place of detective fiction in their libraries. Bit by bit their knowledge grew.

They learned that in the Nile Valley, where cultivation has been carried on for 6000 years without deleterious effect on the soil, tests had proved that worm castings exceed 110 tons per acre in six months.

Two-year peach and nectarine trees 2ft. high were planted in worm-worked soil by Mr. Dransfield last year. This year the trees are 9ft. high. Each yielded five dozen peaches.

A 13in. fig tree planted last year is this year 6ft. high and bearing fruit.

His strawberries are the wonder of those who eat them. Both in soil improvement,

size and flavour they excel anything friends have hitherto tasted.

At a similar worm farm in New Zealand, worms are neatly packed for delivery in grass-covered sods.

In his book Malabar Farm, Louis Bromfield tells how, following lessons learned from peasant farmers in France, he completely eliminated disease, mite and bugs from one plot within four years by building up a well-balanced, worm-rich soil. Strong plants grown in balanced soil resist disease without the aid of sprays and dusts.

By the time Mr. Higgins purchased the Beecroft farm, the partners had collected worms from every district they had visited and had developed a large grey - a very active wriggler - and a large red-slower, but more fertile. Soon, the best of the reds will be selected and given their own box so they can start a strain of bigger and better reds.

When it comes to breeding, worms are very accommodating; each worm is both male and female but cannot fertilise itself; but any two worms can mate, and each will produce fertile eggs.

Under favourable conditions a worm produces an egg or capsule each seven to 10 days, and two to three weeks later the young worms emerge -up to 20 from each egg. These youngsters start their own mating and egg-laying between 60 and 90 days later.

When mature they do not die like moths, locusts and other animals and insects, whose life ends when their reproductive cycle has finished. One earthworm has been kept under observation In the USA for 15 years and is still alive and kicking.

Capsules, which cost about 2/- a dozen, and worms, at 25/- a box of 200, are tipped into pots, or under shady trees, to start their job of cleaning up the earth, rebuilding old, worn-out soil.

Although NSW growers are interested in the soil-building venture, and one prize tulip-grower sends for his worms in batches of 5000, the bulk of inquiries has come from Victoria, where people seem to be more garden-conscious.

In USA, where the offal from huge food-canning firms was sold to fish hatcheries until the canning firms decided to process their waste products into dog and cat foods, the hatcheries were rescued by worm-farmers, who now supply most hatcheries with worms in place of the meat scraps.

The partners do not hug their secrets to themselves; they share their knowledge with all who inquire, for they are Australians, proud of Australia, and stricken by its barren, over-worked, over-fertilised lands.

Continued use of artificial fertilisers will eventually kill most of the micro-organisms in the soil, and worms will either die or migrate to more natural land.

"The worm blokes" think the answer is: Build healthy topsoil by enriching it with compost, manure -and worms.

**Sydney Morning Herald, Sat 22 Apr 1950**

SOILITE DOMESTICATED EARTH-WORMS for a healthy garden, at prices within the reach of everyone. Write for free leaflet. Soilmaster Earth-worm Farms, Murray Farm Road, Beecroft. N.S.W.

**South Coast Times and Wollongong Argus, Mon 11 Jan 1954**

GARDEN MAGIC WITH SURFACE COMPOST.

In recent articles on earthworms I mentioned a crop of beans that had been grown on top of the earth at Beecroft without the labour of digging ground that had become baked hard in summer. The beans were laid on the surface in rows and covered to a depth of about four inches with compost worked down from kitchen refuse, manure, and ordinary soil plus earthworms – thousands of them. The crop was a fine one.