

New Zealand Flatworms



At Rest

The front is the more pointed end when it is moving



New Zealand Flatworms

The New Zealand flatworm was first introduced to the UK in the 1960s, although it has never become as great a problem as was originally feared. It's purple-brown on top, and flat and pointed at both ends. When resting it coils up, is covered in mucus, and is about 1cm wide by 6cm long, although when extended it can be up to 30cm long. It lives on earthworms, covering them in digestive juices to dissolve them before sucking them up. The larvae of ground beetles prey on flatworms. Researchers are eager to know of new sightings. Should you discover a possible flatworm in your garden, please take a digital photograph and email it to: bboag@scri.sari.ac.uk. When taking photos, place an object such as a pencil, or a key, alongside the creature to provide scale.

Organic Solution

Check sites where they like to hide undisturbed - for example under stones and pots - and dispose of any you find. Where there's one, invariably you'll find more. Where they are present, spread a sack on the ground, weigh it down and keep checking if more are hiding beneath. Eggs are usually found between June and September. Destroy the worms by squashing or dropping them into salty water.

There are no approved chemical controls, but Ground and Rove beetle adults and larvae are known to prey on the adults. Birds have taken them as well, but because of their habitat they are rarely exposed to them. By adding lots of organic matter the population of earthworms can be improved. It is possible to trap the flatworms by laying sheets of black polythene, or placing bin-bags of compost around and collecting any which congregate underneath. They can be moved to another site accidentally if they cling to a bag or plant pot - farmers have been moving them around on the large polythene-wrapped silage bales. Chopping them up may not be enough to kill them as I have seen small pieces crawling away, although I don't know how long they would have survived as I didn't give them the chance! So grind them up between two stones, add to very salty or boiling water, or burn them - better still, do all four.

Comment from an Allotment Holder: The New Zealand Flatworms can be killed almost instantly with a squirt of lemon juice.