



To my friends and readers: When this is published, I'll be off exploring Homer's wine-dark sea. Since I'm not around to write a new piece, I'm offering my very first October article, which, I am surprised to realize, was written five years ago.

Spooky Stories from the Garden

In honor of Halloween, I thought I'd share some of the creepier experiences I've had in my gardens. No ghosts or witches, but a few chills up the spine, maybe.

The classic murder mystery. We've all seen at least one movie in which the bad guy maneuvers an inconvenient corpse into a wheelbarrow (the wheels always squeak), and then trundles it out to the back garden, where he buries it under cover of darkness. I'm here to tell you that's just plain boneheaded. Even out here in the country, most of us have neighbors who would notice that much activity in the middle of the night. Instead, whenever you have a body to dispose of, dig the grave in broad daylight, as nonchalantly as possible. That's what I did.

No, not really. But I DID dig a two-foot by six-foot trench for roses in front of my barn, on a corner lot open to two busy streets. Only then did I realize it looked just like a grave, but all the people driving by just smiled and waved. I waved back. Nothing to see here, folks. Just a little, er, composting.

What the realtor never told you. What if it wasn't you, but a previous owner, who left sinister surprises in the garden? My predecessor at the same house had been a champion slob, leaving several dumpsters' worth of trash, half-obsured by waist-high grass. (Not to mention the pizza slices still in the microwave...in a house that had been empty for over a year.) Directly behind the kitchen door was a pile of half-burnt chicken and rabbit bones. My first thought was that he practiced voodoo, but later I found cages in one of the barns, so apparently the rites were culinary in nature.

Weirdly, he had paved over most of the back yard, so it was only after bringing in a backhoe that I could even begin to prepare my long-awaited perennial beds. Classic murder mystery number 2, in which the body has been secreted under a slab of concrete or asphalt, right? My friends and I joked about it as I began to dig. But, six buckets of broken glass later, my shovel hit...something. I moved the shovel a few inches, and then a few more, as we do when trying to gauge the size of a rock. The 'something' seemed to be about eight inches round. Knobby. Irregular. And as I moved the shovel, I began to glimpse white through the dirt. Truly, I was spooked.

For just a few moments, I was Miss Marple. But, of course, it wasn't a skull, but something gardeners are far more likely to find in soil: the ghost of chemicals past, applied by a predecessor. Mine, fortunately, was benign: a half-empty bag of lime, rained on long ago and hardened rock-solid. (Or bone-solid.) And that's as close as I ever want to come to a Superfund environmental contamination site.

The sci-fi horror. My weirdest, freakiest garden experience happened here in Haddam, and while the previous stories might have been just flights of imagination, this one is, unfortunately, all too real.

Soon after buying the house, I put down cardboard and wood chips for new garden beds, leaving it all to break down over the winter. When spring came, I went out back and sank a fork into the now-softened and enriched soil. As soon as the fork hit the ground, I was surrounded by large pink-brown worms levitating up from the chips, rising six or eight inches straight up before slowly dropping back to earth. Startled, repulsed, and spooked, I jumped back. I'd never seen anything like it.

But they're real. Crazy snake worms, jumping worms—they have many names, none of which quite capture the sheer revolting quality of these big, invasive creepy crawlies. Our part of North America has no native earthworms, as the glaciers scraped them all away along with most of our topsoil. The worms we're familiar with are all European imports. But the crazy snake worms are newer, different, and bad news. When touched, they explode into seizure-like writhing. Grab one by the tail end, and it breaks off, while the worm escapes. The soil they infest is recognizable by its coffee-grounds texture, stripped of nutrients, and as their population grows, more and more of the forest floor is depleted of its ability to sustain healthy undergrowth. This is a real-life Halloween trick, with, as yet, no treat. If the biologists come up with a way to eradicate these pests, I'll share it with you.

Really, I'd rather have a bucket of gummi worms.