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AGRICULTURE

Earthworm Substances Make Plants Grow Better

► THE LOWLY EARTHWORM turns and secretes a compound into the soil that makes plants grow more vigorously.

The pastures of New Zealand have become richer since certain earthworms were transplanted into the soils, reported R. L. Nielson of the Ruakura Agricultural Research Centre, Hamilton, New Zealand.

As the worms work their way through the earth, they secrete complex biologically active compounds that help nourish the plants, Mr. Nielson stated in *Nature*, 208: 1113, 1965. The compounds were extracted by a process of grinding up earthworms and filtering. The presence of the compounds, some of which displayed biological activity, was revealed by application of paper chromatography.

Each species of the 14 earthworm species known in New Zealand produced a different active compound. Two species of common garden slugs have also been found to contain plant growth substances.

• *Science News Letter*, 89:78 January 29, 1966

Nature Note

Maidenhair Tree

► ONE OF THE OLDEST living plant species in the world, the maidenhair tree or ginkgo, has adapted in remarkable fashion to the hazards of modern day technology—polluted air, hot dry pavement and salt used to melt ice on streets and sidewalks.

The ginkgo has survived for the last 120 million years. At one time it was widely distributed over the temperate regions of the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. The grinding glaciers of the Ice Ages may have caused its destruction and the ginkgo disappeared from North America, Europe and western Siberia. Ginkgo did survive in the milder climate of China, however. There they were tended for centuries by Chinese monks as temple decorations.

Reintroduced into Europe in 1730 and into England in 1754, the ornamental tree was then carried to America in the 1780s, and today lines many streets throughout most of the United States.

The ginkgo's distinctive fan-shaped leaf with the cleft at the top is found in no other flowering plant. It resembles the leaflet of the maidenhair fern; hence the name. Somewhat leathery in texture, the leaf is bright green when young. In autumn it turns a bright clear yellow.

The ripe fruit of the female ginkgo tree is round, with a thin orange-yellow skin that bursts emitting offensive odor when the fruit falls to the ground. For this reason most city landscapers prefer to use the less odoriferous male tree for decoration.

The Chinese and Japanese long ago learned to clean off the offensive pulp and wash the smooth white inner shell enclosing the tasty kernel. These nuts are known as white or silver nuts—ginkgo means silver fruit in Chinese.

• *Science News Letter*, 89:78 January 29, 1966