

FALL CITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



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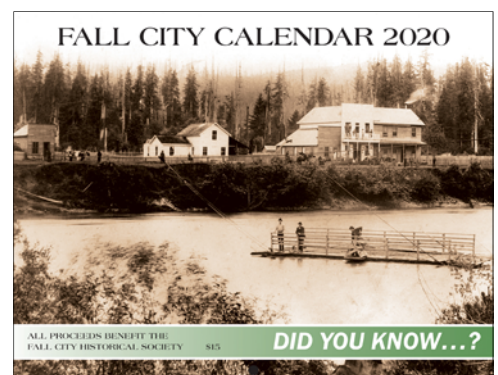
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Support for our work from King County Heritage 4Culture is gratefully acknowledged.





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**DID YOU KNOW...??**

by Ruth Pickering

Our common Northwest millipede has an interesting variety of names: Harpappe haydeniana (scientifically speaking), or yellow spotted millipede, almond scented millipede, cyanide producing millipede, and, most imaginatively, “night train”, as the yellow spots on a black body are like the lighted windows on a passing train. I’ve always enjoyed encountering these colorful critters and have been struck these past few weeks by the numbers I find happily grazing in last year’s compost piles.



“Night train” portrait by Alan Bauer

This inspired me to get on the web and learn more about them. I was astonished to find that the almond scented millipede is not just a quirky natural neighbor, but is thought to play an absolutely crucial role in the breakdown of organic matter in our forests. Andrew Moldenke, from the Entomology Department at Oregon State University, estimates that 33-50% of all the dead conifer and deciduous leaves that come to rest on the forest floor are first eaten by this millipede, which then excretes the material in a form that is accessible to other soil invertebrates, fungi, and microbes for further breakdown into soil. “It is one of the most critical links in the entire soil foodweb.” Amazing!

Now for a little natural history (thanks to Nancy Baumeister, also from OSU). A millipede moves through the leafy ground layer holding its slightly curved antennae in front of it to feel and smell the way. Its flattened and smooth body allows it to fit into cracks and crevices. Mating occurs in spring and several hundred tiny eggs are laid in the soil or leaf litter. When the young hatch, they are small, with only a few legs. It takes about two years and seven molts to grow to adulthood. When it’s time to molt, they build a hollow chamber of soil, crawl inside and seal it completely. They remain inside for several weeks, shedding the old exoskeleton and adding new segments and legs. When the new exoskeleton has hardened, they chew a hole in the chamber and emerge. The immature millipedes are lighter gray with pale spots. Adults are shiny black with bright yellow spots and have twenty segments and 30(males) or 31(females) pairs of legs, two pairs on most segments. They are not eaten by many creatures because they can protect themselves in two ways. The first is to curl into a tight ball with the hard exoskeleton protecting its back. The other way is to release a smell from small pores in each segment that can kill or scare off other small creatures. To us, it is a pleasant smell, like almond extract (hence the name), but it contains cyanide (hence the name) that is toxic in very small dosages to small creatures such as beetles and shrews. Interestingly, all other millipedes seem to be immune to the cyanide vapors, and some beetles are also able to avoid its toxic effects and make a meal of our friend!

So – next time you see a “night train,” pick it up gently for a closer look. Check for the almond-y smell. Then say “Thank you!” and carefully return it to the ground. And extend your thanks to all the unseen critters that keep our forests healthy.

(Reprinted from the July 2002 Fall City Newsletter. Many thanks to Alan Bauer for crawling around in his yard to get this great photo.)