

What's that creepy-crawly?

This year's Soil Animal Days were launched this week with an inspection of the roof garden at the Netherlands Institute of Ecology (NIOO).

The organizer, WUR soil expert Gerard Korthals, picks up a tree trunk to see what creatures are sheltering under it. That is exactly what volunteers all around the country are being asked to do between now and the end of next Wednesday: find and count soil animals. In the garden, under stones, between plants, or in a patch of dug-over soil. This is the seventh edition of this Citizen Science project. What once started as a one-day extension of Animal Day has turned into a 10-day event, at least. Korthals: 'To make it easier for people to join in! The Soil Animal Days are primarily about awareness-raising, says Korthals. 'We use them to try and generate more recognition among the general public of the importance and utility of a healthy soil! And the residents of that soil are crucial to its health.

Happy Families

Using a simple determination table and a score card, everyone can go into action in their own garden. According to Korthals, the scores provide a fairly reliable picture of the ecological condition of the garden. Promotion materials such as a pack of Soil Animals Happy Families cards help ensure you learn something in the process as well.



Giulia Bongiorno and Gerard Korthals inspect the roof garden at NIOO.
Photo Roelof Kleis

Who knew, for example, that the humble earthworm has 10 hearts? Or that woodlice carry their young in a pouch between their front legs, just like kangaroos? Or that mice can carry up to 50 times their own weight?

The Soil Animal Days are still only a Dutch event to date. But if Korthals has his way, that will change. 'There is more and more interest among our neighbouring countries. And WUR wants it to become international too. We're going to take up the idea, but it will require funding. At present, the whole thing is run on a voluntary basis.' RK