



Have I Got Worms!

BY JEANNINE GLAVES

Last year, a spinner in my neck of the woods (Oklahoma) had more silkworms than she could feed and was looking for homes for them. I said that I would take 50, but when I got home I found I had 150—just a smidgen more than I had bargained for. Sometimes you get more than you ask for. I should have learned.

This year I wanted 50 silk worms again, and a friend brought me some of her silkworm eggs. I didn't count—big mistake! I had 700 worms hatch. It takes about a month for the worms to mature and start spinning their cocoons. When they first hatched, I needed 6 leaves per day per 50 worms—that's 84 leaves a day. By the last week, I needed a 5-gallon bucket of leaves per day to feed the 500 remaining worms. I had a plan though. I had carefully waited for the mulberry leaves in my back yard to grow to the right size and was reassured when the weatherman promised that winter was over. He lied and a frost hit and then hit again. The leaves wilted, and I had 700 hungry mouths to feed—but no pressure! I was climbing ladders and trees, had poison ivy (twice!), an ear infection from allergies, begged leaves from friends and strangers, pulled off highways looking for leaves but found chiggers, and lost sleep worrying if new leaves would grow fast enough.

My friend found silkworm chow from Mulberry Farms in Fallbrook, California, and we spread it like peanut butter on the few leaves we had so the worms would eat



it. I found myself cooking for my worms when I hardly cook for my husband, David. I did end up doing some cooking for David, since he had gotten leaves from a buddy after posting a plea at work. I felt that I should at least cook for him in exchange for the worm time that he put in.

One month after the eggs hatched, all the worms were doing was eating. And they were eating a lot—a 5-gallon bucket of mulberry leaves a day! To say that I was looking forward to the day when they stopped eating to spin their silk cocoons was putting it mildly. I started to threaten the worms. I told them I would get out the skillet, butter, and garlic and sauté them into a protein-packed dinner if they didn't start to spin cocoons—it worked! One worm went to work and started a cocoon on my mom's birthday. Since my mom passed away last November, I wondered if this was her way of saving my sanity.

I had lost about 200 worms because I didn't have enough leaves, but there were still about 500 worms to feed. I needed lots of leaves. I found two mulberry trees while at a party and did a happy dance when I was allowed to take all of the “weeds” I wanted. I hauled away a trash bag full.

And then a miracle: 9 pounds of mulberry leaves arrived in time to feed the remaining worms for the last few days before they started spinning



cocoons. My desperate pleas had been heard by a fellow guild member. I even had enough that I could share leaves with my friend.

Now I sit itching from the poison ivy and chiggers and watching hundreds of little plastic cups with the bottoms cut off turn into cocoon houses. I had to go with plastic cups because we couldn't finish enough toilet paper for tubes for the job. There are times when I think I'm getting too old for this, but then I reconsider. Next time, though, I'll count.

Jeannine Glaves degums the silk cocoons and stretches them over a frame to make mawata squares to spin from, and also reels her cocoons to create a continuous filament. She uses the cocoons as visual aids when she's demonstrating and teaching about spinning and fibers. She has been a spinner for over thirty years and continues to take classes to add to her knowledge. She has won awards at Convergence and the Midwest Weavers Conference for her spinning. She has taught for many years and feels that passing it on will keep our craft alive.