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Earwigs

Earwigs are some of the most recognizable and common insect pests in the garden and around the home. The most characteristic feature of earwigs is the pair of pincers or cerci, at the tip of the abdomen. There are several species of earwigs in Maryland. The most common is the European Earwig (*Forficula auricularia*).

Description

The body of an earwig is reddish-brown, slender and about 3/4 of an inch long. The adults have 2 pairs of wings. The front pair of wings is short and leathery. The hind pair is membranous and folded under the front pair. Even though earwigs have wings, they move by crawling. The pincers or cerci, are straight on the female and curved on the male (see illustration).

Life Cycle

The adult female earwig lays her eggs in the soil and guards them. She cares for the young until they are old enough to fend for themselves. She then leaves them to lay more eggs. Young earwigs resemble adults, but are smaller. The time required to complete the entire life cycle varies depending on environmental conditions and food.

Earwigs live in dark, moist places such as under stones, boards, in mulch, soil and plant debris. They are mostly nocturnal in their activity, preferring to come out in the evening. Contrary to the old wives' tales, earwigs do not enter peoples' ears and do not attack people.

Damage

Earwigs have a varied diet. Some are primarily predators, feeding on aphids, insect larvae, snails and slow-moving insects. They also eat plant material such as seedling vegetables, flowers, fruit, and foliage. Damaged seedlings may be missing all or parts of leaves and stems. Leaves and flowers of mature plants may have irregular holes or edges chewed. Fruits will have holes chewed in them.

Management

Earwigs are considered a nuisance pest, and only cause significant damage to plants when populations are high. Indoors they may be found in furniture cushions, linens, fabrics, or



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just scurrying around. To minimize earwig problems indoors, keep areas close to the house clear of debris and hiding places. To minimize damage to plants outdoors, keep compost piles away from vegetable gardens and annual beds. In small backyard situations, earwigs can generally be controlled by persistent trapping. A simple trap can be made using a tuna or cat food can. Add 1/2 inch of vegetable oil and place them around the garden. Dump and refill with oil as they fill up with earwigs. Another trap involves a moistened, rolled up newspaper. Or use short pieces of bamboo or hose. Place these traps on the soil near plants just before dark. Earwigs have a preference for tight, dark places, and will crawl into the tubes and stay there. In the morning, shake the earwigs into soapy water to kill them. Continue this procedure every day until you are no longer catching earwigs. Natural predators of earwigs include toads, birds and insect predators.

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Rev. 8/2011

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