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Advice to Grow By ... Ask Us!

GARDEN GOOD GUY OR BAD GUY? EARWIGS

By Nanette Londeree, Marin Master Gardener

Have you ever been strolling through your garden, spied a particularly lovely rose blossom, and as you reach out and deeply inhale the sweet fragrance of the bloom, out comes an earwig, almost crawling up your nose? Yuk! That's almost as bad as the supposed genesis of the name earwig - the old wives tale that has these creepy insects crawling into sleeping people's ears and tunneling into their brain. Who are these creatures and what are they doing on your plants? Are they bad bugs or beneficials? Read on, and then decide.



Earwigs (Order *Dermoptera*) are nocturnal and communal creatures; they gather during the day in moist, dark, tight hiding places in the garden - under rocks or stones, loose clods of soil or boards; around vegetables, dense growth of vines or weeds, in flower blossoms, or even within fruit damaged by other pests such as snails, birds, or cutworms. As moisture-loving insects, they thrive in the conditions of an irrigated garden where they can remain active all year. And, if it gets too dry, too hot or cold outside, they may take up residence indoors.

Sometimes called pincerbugs, these easily recognized insects sport a pair of prominent appendages at the tail end of their body called cerci which resemble forceps and are used for defense. The reddish-brown adult is about 3/4- inch long; most species have wings under short, hard wing covers, though they seldom fly. Immature earwigs look like adults except smaller and lack wings. The earwigs' body is quite maneuverable, and other than an occasional weak pinch from their ferocious-looking pinchers (if mishandled), earwigs don't hurt humans. However, they can emit a foul-smelling, yellowish brown liquid from special glands when threatened.

They're not particularly discriminating eaters and consume a wide variety of materials both living and dead, acting in part as recyclers. They eat insects and mites, are voracious feeders of aphids and insect eggs, but may also gobble up beneficial insects. Growing shoots of plants, soft fruits, sweet corn, along with zinnias, marigolds and dahlias flowers are some of their favored meals. The damage they cause can mimic that of caterpillars - on older plant leaves including fruit trees, they produce numerous irregular holes or chewed leaf margins. Seedlings may be missing all or parts of their leaves and stem.

Management of these creatures is not easy, and you need to decide if you can tolerate the bit of damage they do in exchange for their potentially beneficial role. The best control is keeping plants strong and healthy enough to withstand a little nibbling and modifying the environment to discourage their presence. Along with good garden sanitation, reduce their hiding places - eliminate dense undergrowth of vines, ground cover and weeds around vegetable and flower gardens; prune away fruit tree suckers; remove leaves, boards, boxes, trash, and other debris from planting areas. Lowering surface moisture levels by using drip irrigation rather than overhead watering can also help reduce their numbers.

Trapping earwigs is easy; place hollow pieces of bamboo, a length of old garden hose, or rolled up newspapers on shaded, moist soil - they will seek shelter in these so that you can simply toss them into a bucket of water and drown them, or dispose in a garbage can sitting in bright sunlight. Alternatively, shallow containers filled with vegetable oil or soapy water can be buried up to their rim in your garden, where earwigs, and probably the odd slug or other bug will drown in the liquid.

While these rather unsightly little creatures can be a help in the garden by consuming pests and assisting in breaking down dead material, they can also do some damage. Even in large numbers, while annoying, they present no health hazards. So, what did you decide - in your garden, are they a good guy or bad guy?

Photos courtesy of Baldo Villegas