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Millipedes

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Millipedes normally live outdoors but may become nuisance pests indoors by their presence. At certain times of the year (usually late summer and autumn) due to excessive rainfall or even drought, a few or hundreds or more leave the soil and crawl into houses, basements, first-floor rooms, up foundation walls, into living rooms, up side walls, and drop from the ceilings. Some homeowners as early as late June have reported annoying populations accumulating in swimming pools. Fall migrations during rainy and cool weather may result as a natural urge to seek hibernation quarters. Heavy continuous rainfall in newly developed wooded areas with virgin soil (decaying organic matter habitats) are often troublesome sites. Millipedes do not bite humans nor damage structures, household possessions, or foods. They can give off a disagreeable odor and if crushed, leave an unsightly mess.

Identification

Millipedes, or “thousand-legged worms,” are brownish-black or mottled with shades of orange, red, or brown, and are cylindrical (wormlike) or slightly flattened, elongated

animals, most of which have two pairs of legs per body segment, except for the first three segments which have only one pair of legs. Antennae are short, usually seven-segmented, and the head is rounded with no poison jaws. Their short legs ripple in waves as they glide over a surface. They often curl up into a tight “C” shape, like a watch spring, and remain motionless when touched. They range from ½ to 1 ¼ inches long depending on the species. They crawl slowly and protect themselves by means of glands that secrete an unpleasant odor.

Life Cycle and Habits

Millipedes can be long-lived, sometimes up to seven years. They overwinter as adults and lay eggs singly or in small groups in the soil. Some females lay between 20 to 300 eggs (fertilization is internal), which hatch in a few weeks with young reaching adulthood in the autumn. Some reach sexual maturity the second year, while others spend four to five years in the larval stage.

Millipedes are attracted to dark, cool, moist environments, usually going unnoticed in the summer due to



Typical millipede that has flat side plates on each segment.



Typical cylindrical millipede that invades homes.

their nocturnal habits (activity at night) and tendency to disperse. They feed on living and decomposing vegetation and occasionally on dead snails, earthworms, and insects. Slight feeding injury can occur on soft-stemmed plants, in gardens and greenhouses. They cannot tolerate water-saturated soil, which forces them to the surface and higher ground. Likewise, dry, drought conditions can stimulate migration. In the autumn, it is believed they may migrate for better overwintering sites. If one or all of these conditions exist, sometimes hundreds or thousands (shovelful) of millipedes are found in garages, first floor rooms, and basements. Others believe that migration may occur when the food supply dwindles in October and November.

These creatures are usually abundant in compost piles and heavily mulched ornamental plantings, moving out shortly after sunset sometimes into dwellings. Over the past years, they have migrated in large numbers during a period of unusually warm weather for the time of the year (75 degrees F) and then would immediately stop when a quick drop in temperature (cold snap) occurred. Anyone handling these creatures without gloves will notice a lingering odor (hydrogen cyanide-like), and the fluid may be harmful if rubbed into the eyes. If crushed, millipedes may stain rugs and fabrics.

Control Measures

Millipedes, related to lobsters, crayfish, and shrimp, require moist habitats and areas of high humidity. It is important to keep the house and outside area as dry as possible.

Prevention

Millipedes prefer moist, decaying organic matter (similar to forest soil) and shade. Always keep compost

piles, grass clippings, rotting wood, leaf piles, plant debris, stones, etc., away from the house foundation as far as practical to reduce moist, damp, dark places where feeding and reproduction can occur. Be sure to check for wood imbedded or buried in the soil.

Also, ivy beds and mulch near the house may become a favored habitat. Rake and remove trash or leaf litter in a strip three feet wide surrounding the house foundation if practical, exposing the soil surface to drying from the air and sunlight. Repair and seal cracks and openings in the foundation wall and around door and window frames with caulking compound, weather stripping, or door sweeps.

Properly ventilate basements and subfloor crawl spaces to eliminate excess moisture. Indoors, many will die of desiccation (drying out) and can be collected by broom and dustpan, vacuum cleaner, or other mechanical means and discarded.

Insecticides

Total control of millipedes during migration periods is difficult. But several insecticides are registered for “perimeter” treatments. The concept is to apply a barrier of insecticide that will either repel or kill the millipedes that try to cross the barrier. Both liquid sprays and granular formulations are available at most garden centers. These products should list millipedes on the label as not all insecticides are able to control these non-insect arthropods. Retreatments are commonly needed though some products claim to provide season-long control.

Sprays, fogs, and total-release insecticides (commonly called bug-bombs) are not effective in preventing millipedes from entering a home or building. At best, these may kill any active millipedes, but most of these products have no long-lasting residual effects.

This publication contains pesticide recommendations that are subject to change at any time. These recommendations are provided only as a guide. It is always the pesticide applicator’s responsibility, by law, to read and follow all current label directions for the specific pesticide being used. Due to constantly changing labels and product registration, some of the recommendations given in this writing may no longer be legal by the time you read them. If any information in these recommendations disagrees with the label, the recommendation must be disregarded. No endorsement is intended for products mentioned, nor is criticism meant for products not mentioned. The author, The Ohio State University, and Ohio State University Extension assume no liability resulting from the use of these recommendations.

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