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Millipedes, centipedes and sowbugs: characteristics and control

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Quick Facts

Millipedes, centipedes, sowbugs and pillbugs are minor nuisance pests that tend to move into houses during brief periods in the fall or spring.

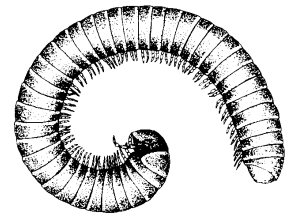
Millipedes, pillbugs and sowbugs also may feed on tender seedlings in greenhouses and gardens.

Control of these arthropods is rarely necessary.

If control is necessary, it primarily should involve moisture control since these arthropods are susceptible to drying.

small legs. A common homeowner description of millipedes is, "little black worms crawling in the basement windows." When dead or disturbed, millipedes tend to curl into a tight coil. Millipedes do not bite or pose any danger to humans.

Millipedes feed on rotting organic matter such as leaves and wood, and rarely feed on tender green leaves and roots. They spend almost all the time in very moist environments, such as under rocks or logs and in the thatch of lawns.



Millipede.

Movement into houses often is sudden and very sporadic. Most millipede

Millipedes, centipedes and sowbugs are many-legged arthropod relatives of insects. Generally these organisms are found in small numbers in damp locations around the yard, but occasionally they become unusually abundant or move into homes. At these times, millipedes, centipedes and sowbugs may cause considerable concern to homeowners.

Millipedes

The most common millipedes are dark brown and reach 1 to 1-1/2 inches when full grown. The general body shape is rounded and very elongated with many

This information provided by:

1. Colorado State University Cooperative Extension entomologist and associate professor, entomology. 1/92. ©Colorado State University Cooperative Extension. 1994. For more information, contact your county Cooperative Extension office.

movement takes place in September and October and again in mid-spring. Millipede invasions of a home, usually a cellar, often take place shortly after a period of wet weather and end as suddenly as they start.

Because millipedes require high moisture conditions to survive, they usually die in a home within a few days. Chronic millipede problems in a home are associated with damp conditions. Any measures taken to dry out these moist areas usually are sufficient to soon kill the millipedes in the home. The hard body of the millipede, however, remains intact for a considerable time after it is dead.

Because millipedes cause no damage in homes, other than a minor annoyance, the best way to handle millipede infestations is to wait a few days for the problem to subside and then vacuum the millipede bodies that remain. Removal of debris and other favorable millipede habitats from around the house also will help reduce problems.

Where problems are more severe, exterior banding of the foundation with diazinon (Spectracide) or chlorpyrifos (Dursban) may be considered to prevent millipede movement into homes. Make this band a few feet in width and apply shortly before periods when millipede problems occur in an area.

Usually only shaded sides of the home need treatment. Whole yard treatments are unnecessary and not recommended. However, most sod webworm and white grub treatments will also control millipedes.

When millipedes threaten injury to seedlings, a number of practices can be used to limit injury. Increasing the seeding rate of the crop or temporarily allowing the growth of seedling weeds can divert much feeding.

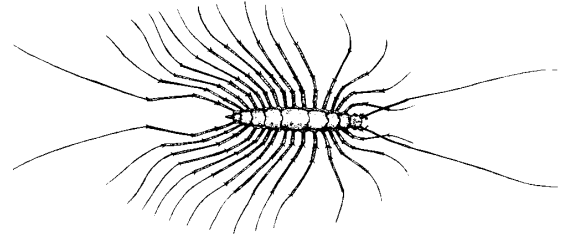
Moisture control practices can cause millipedes to leave a garden area for a more humid environment. Also, millipedes can be collected from under boards or newspapers laid on the ground.

Where pesticides are required, carbaryl (Sevin) or diazinon might be used for millipede control on crops for which they are labeled. Once plants are well established they can outgrow millipede feeding.

Centipedes

In general appearance, centipedes are superficially similar to millipedes. However, there are important differences. Centipedes have one pair of legs per body segment; millipedes appear to have two pairs on most

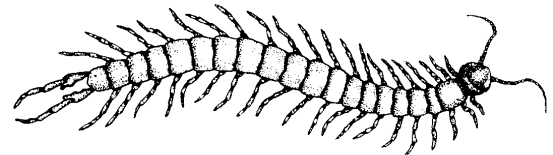
segments. The legs of a centipede are usually quite prominent, and centipedes are far more active than millipedes, particularly the common house centipede. Most centipede bodies are flattened and elongated. Centipedes feed on small insects and other arthropods.



House centipede.

Centipedes usually are much less common in homes than millipedes. However, centipedes may be far more conspicuous, particularly one Colorado species that can reach six inches in length.

Centipedes in homes are found most frequently in the morning trapped in bathtubs or wash basins. They also may be seen darting for cover when a light is turned on in a dark room. Occasionally, startled centipedes may run in the direction of the person entering the room giving the incorrect impression that the centipede is "attacking."



Centipede (Scolopendra species).

Except for the largest species, centipedes can not bite through skin, so hazard to humans is very remote. Centipede bites are extremely rare, particularly since they are very light shy and only bite when being picked up or crushed. The bite of the largest centipede species is reported to cause a sharp, temporary pain, similar to that of a bee sting.

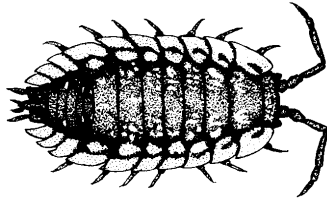
Control of centipedes is similar to that for millipedes—wait out the problem and control moisture sources in and around the home. Centipede infestations usually involve very few individual centipedes.

Extreme situations in homes may require insecticides as indicated for millipedes. Interior insecticide applications, of chlorpyrifos (Dursban) or propoxur (Baygon),

generally are not recommended, but if used, should be applied strictly according to labeled instructions.

Sowbugs and Pillbugs

Sowbugs and pillbugs are small gray crustaceans usually found outdoors under rocks or other cover. They feed on decaying vegetable matter and occasionally small plants. Sowbugs and pillbugs do not bite and are harmless to humans.



Sowbug

During some times of the year, particularly after a period of extended wet spring weather, sowbugs and pillbugs may move into homes. However, their survival in the dryness of a house is even shorter than for millipedes and centipedes. Because of this and the very minor annoyance problems that they cause, controls generally are unnecessary. Chemical and cultural controls effective for millipedes and centipedes also are effective for sowbugs and pillbugs.