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NF96-302 Pillbugs and Sowbugs

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Pillbugs and Sowbugs

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Gardeners and kids who turn over stones are familiar with the common "roly-poly" or pillbug, due to its habit of rolling itself into a ball when disturbed. Pillbugs are oval-shaped, usually about 1/4-1/2 inch long, brown to purplish-gray, flattened on the underside and convex on top. The body consists of a head, which bears a pair of antennae, a seven-segmented thorax, seven pairs of legs, and a short six-segmented abdomen.

They normally feed on decaying plant material. Since pillbugs are crustaceans, their relatives are mostly aquatic and include the lobsters, shrimps and swimming-hole crawdads. They belong to the order *Isopoda* and are often referred to as isopods. While pillbugs are not aquatic, they are tied to moist conditions and cannot survive very long in a dry environment. Sowbugs are closely related to pillbugs and are similar, except that they cannot roll into a ball and have two long tail-like appendages at the end of the abdomen.

Life Cycle

Eggs are deposited under the mother's body in a space called a marsupium. The young are white when they emerge from eggs and are carried about by the mother for some time, often up to 40 days, before dispersing. Some species of pillbugs and sowbugs can live two or more years.

Damage

Pillbugs and sowbugs feed on organic matter, including decayed plant material, but can damage young plants. If pillbugs or sowbugs are abundant in mulches and litter in adjacent landscape plantings, they often enter homes through cracks and crevices. Once inside, they usually die unless basements, entryways or first floor rooms are very moist.

Prevention and Control

To prevent pillbugs and sowbugs from becoming nuisances, keep mulches and decaying plant material

well back (at least 6-8 inches) from the home foundation. Allow mulches to dry out occasionally to reduce activity and reproduction of pillbugs and sowbugs. Be sure that basement windows are tight, that cracks and crevices are sealed, that entryways are secure and basements are dry.

To control pillbugs and sowbugs, establish a 3-5 foot barrier strip of a residual insecticide such as diazinon, chlorpyrifos (Dursban) or carbaryl (Sevin) around the home foundation to prevent entry through cracks and crevices in the foundation. Use either granular or spray (emulsifiable concentrate or wettable powder) formulations.

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