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G77-342 Sowbugs and Pillbugs

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Sowbugs and Pillbugs

This publication covers the identification, life history, and control of sowbugs and pillbugs.

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- [Description](#)
- [Life History](#)
- [Damage](#)
- [Control](#)

Homeowners working around shrubs, in the garden, or along the foundation of the house, frequently find little grayish colored bugs. They often describe them as looking like "little armadillos." What they are finding are sowbugs or pillbugs or both. These creatures are not insects, but belong to the same class of animals as crabs and shrimp.

Description

Sowbugs and pillbugs are wingless and vary from brown to slate-gray. Both have slightly elongated or oval flattened bodies and may be 1/2 inch long, but are usually somewhat shorter. The body covering is composed of a series of armored plates, giving them the armadillo appearance. The eyes are well developed and there are 7 pairs of legs. The sowbug differs from the pillbug in that it cannot roll into a ball like the pillbug when it is disturbed. The sowbug has two prominent tail like appendages which the pillbug does not have.



Pillbugs. (Photo: Van Waters & Rogers)

Life History

The life histories of the sowbugs and pillbugs are very similar, and for most purposes can be considered the same. They are inactive in the winter time. With the arrival of spring, their activity increases and mating occurs. The females carry from 7 to 200 eggs in a pouch on the underside of their bodies. In 3 to 7 weeks after mating, the eggs hatch and the young remain in the pouch for about 6 weeks. When the young leave the pouch, they begin feeding and mature. They live up to 3 years.

Damage

Both sowbugs and pillbugs breathe by means of gills; therefore, they require moisture so that the gills may be kept moist. Neither cause serious damage under most conditions, since they feed primarily on decaying organic matter. However, they may injure tender shoots of young plants in the home or greenhouse. They often also occur in areas such as crawl spaces or basements and will migrate onto a sidewalk after a heavy rain. In the crawl spaces, basements and on the sidewalks, they are primarily a nuisance.

Control

Cultural control consists of drying up the moist areas where the sowbugs and pillbugs occur. They are most often found around sidewalks, house foundations and other moist outside places. Drying can be accomplished by removing organic matter such as grass clippings, leaf litter and bedding mulches from moist areas. If sowbugs and pillbugs are migrating into the home, the foundation walls should be repaired. In addition, cracks around doors, basement windows and similar openings should be sealed. Proper drying ventilation of basements and crawl spaces will aid in reducing the favorite environment and thus the bug population.

Some of the heaviest migrations of sowbugs and pillbugs come from wooded areas such as shelterbelts and orchards. These areas as well as those around and in the home can be treated with insecticides for control.

Chemical

Outside Homes: Diazinon 25% EC. Mix 8 ounces in 3 gallons of water. Spray a 5 foot barrier around house next to foundation. Dursban 5.3% EC. Mix 4 ounces in 15 gallons water. Apply to 500 square feet around foundations and infested turf. Diazinon 5% granules. Scatter 2 pounds per 1000 square feet around house and in infested turf.

In Vegetable Gardens: Carbaryl (Sevin) 5% bait. Apply 3/4 pound per 1000 square feet to surface of garden.

Inside Homes: Baygon 1%: Use undiluted. Apply as a coarse spray to infested surfaces and sowbugs. Do not apply to rugs, draperies, wallpaper, or similar materials that may be stained. Do not apply to plastic, rubber and asphalt surfaces. Sowbugs and pillbugs do not cause damage inside homes. It is best to sweep them up with a broom or vacuum sweeper and dispose of them, rather than using chemical spray.

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