

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Almost every gardener has a problem with earwigs. In some places they are second only to slugs in damage to gardeners. Fully grown they are only about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch long and reddish brown in color. The standout feature is the pincer in the rear of their bodies. Some have scent glands on their abdomens that contain a foul smelling odor that is used probably as a defense weapon. They can inflict a small nip if grasped roughly.

Earwigs feed on the soft parts of plants. they can completely destroy your new crop of vegetable seedlings. The most common plants injured by severe foliage injury are peas, beans, lettuce, cauliflower, beets, potatoes and cabbage. They also like and can destroy dahlia, sweet William, zinnias and the stamens and petals of many other flowers. They enjoy the silk on corn also and we have found them in our lettuce and abundantly in our grapes.

The typical injury that earwigs produce is lots and lots of tiny odd-shaped holes in leaves. The adult earwig will also bore into ripe tree fruit such as prunes, peaches and apples. They work on ornamental shrubs and trees as well. They also eat decaying plant material and will feed on aphids.

Earwigs hide during daytime and come out at night to feed. At dawn's early light they scurry to any dark, moist nook or cranny they can find. That is the time to trap them, and they are fairly easy to trap. You can use dampened rolled up newspaper, pieces of cut up garden hose, sheets of corrugated cardboard or even hollow bamboo canes. Another alternative is tuna cans with about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch of vegetable oil in them; cat food cans work well also. Check these traps every morning and dump them into a bucket of soapy water. Use both methods and several of each. You can actually buy earwig bait but it usually contains carbaryl, which can be deadly to bees and we do need those bees for good pollination.

Earwigs over winter just below the soil both as eggs and as adults. The female can lay up to 60 white, round eggs on the top two inches of soil a year. Earwigs live about a year and usually die in the winter following their birth. If you find them in your house vacuum them up and caulk all cracks and crevices and use screens and weather stripping to keep them out. Remove piles of firewood, debris and mulch that touch the sides of the house. Prune all the foliage that comes up against the sides of the house.

The name earwig comes from an old Anglo Saxon word "earwicga" which means ear creature. This term comes from an old fear that they (the earwig) can crawl into the ear and bore in to the brain. This fear came from Europe, perhaps from the time when people slept on hay, straw or dirt floors. There is no record of this ever actually happening.

What it all boils down to is, keep your garden, yard and area around your house clutter and debris free. Trap early and continue until you no longer have a problem. Happy gardening.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.