

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Moving piles of blue to gray “dirt” found in driveways, yards, patios and even on the surface of mud puddles, during particularly wet periods of weather, are frequently found to be composed of many minute springtails, a fairly primitive, wingless insect. Their function in nature is to live in soil and decaying organic matter where they help in the breakdown, or recycling process.

Springtails can also be white, yellow or gray, and it is these light-colored types that are occasionally found in the soil of houseplants. These insects are usually one-eighth of an inch or less in length. Springtails get their name from their ability to catapult themselves up to four inches by means of a tail-like mechanism which is tucked up under their abdomen. When a threat is sensed, the catch on the mechanism is released and it “springs” them away from danger.

These moisture-loving insects usually feed on algae, mildew and rotting plant material. They are also among the few organisms known to break down DDT in the soil. Since they help reduce decaying vegetation to soil, help keep molds down by feeding on fungi and also assist in aerating and restructuring soils, most springtails should be considered beneficial, and left to go their way. If large concentrations appear to be a hazard to foot traffic, you may disperse them with water from the garden hose, or with a broom.

During wet periods in fall, winter and spring, springtails may occur in enormous numbers, causing homeowners some alarm. Their pest status is that of a “nuisance” or “dooryard” pest. When abundant, these insects can enter homes through doorways, screens, or other openings. However, if the humidity is low inside, they will normally shrivel and die quickly. On the other hand, if mildew is present, free moisture occurs around water pipes, or decaying organic matter is present in the soil of houseplants, springtails may persist.

Control of springtails is rarely necessary unless they are becoming a nuisance. Prevention of their establishment is usually all that is necessary. Maintaining low indoor humidity is the best prevention method. Eliminate any moldy materials indoors, such as old mattresses, and other situations that provide moist breeding areas, for these provide good habitat. Outside the house, remove leaves, mulch, etc. from around the foundation. The best way to rid houseplants of these insects is through soil replacement or sterilization. Insecticidal soap may be used on those insects that are above soil level.

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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 Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.