



THE EARWIG HATH COME

Norma Evans

Even non-gardeners know that the earwigs are here this year. The frost did not penetrate the ground very deeply last winter. So as a result of the great snow cover, more earwigs than ever survived to visit us this spring. Fortunately they are harmless to humans but when they come into your house like ants at a picnic.

During the day they hide out in dark damp locations; under pots, boards, etc. When they manage to get indoors, they seem to favour toothbrushes, wash clothes, etc., even bedding. Actually, since their wings are next to useless and they can only scamper short distances, people are responsible for moving them about the country.

There are many ways to reduce their presence both in our houses and gardens. They hang around house foundations and door frames. After foraging all night they look for dampish, dark hiding spots. Hiding places are selected on the basis of how many of their body hairs touch a solid object. Use a pine scented cleaner for washing floors. Use this product full strength or any powdered household cleanser around doorways and basement windows. This will eliminate these locations as suitable hiding spots.

In order to reduce plant destruction, it helps to understand their life cycle. Earwigs mate in the autumn. In early spring the female digs a burrow for herself and her eggs (50 to 90) and seals it off. The eggs are piled up and licked to prevent drying out or spoiling. After hatching they immediately moult and are cared for by the mother until the second moult. The female then opens the nest since the nymphs are now able to forage for themselves. This is when the worst nightly destruction takes place. Depending on the weather, the females open the nests in June or early July. During the 2nd and 3rd moults, the nymphs eat only vegetation.

Mainly they create irregular holes in the leaves where they have been eating. In some cases, my beans for instance, they ate the entire leaf and left behind a sad looking skeleton.

The best time to begin controls is when the nymphs are first out of the nest and they begin their nightly munching. After the 3rd moult they eat a "balanced diet". This includes other insects (including their dead mother) as well as vegetation. They have 5 moults before becoming adults.

Diatomaceous earth is a safe insecticide that can be sprinkled around plants and foundations. The ideal control is a flock of banty hens. The tachinid fly is the main insect predator. It is grey, very small (1/3 to 1/2").

Many types of traps are effective, but are only after the female opens the nest. Place traps in dark, damp hiding places, under shrubs, woodpiles, etc. Traps can be made from rolled up corrugated cardboard, crumpled newspapers and magazines, small cans with openings punctured in the ends, short pieces of hose, hollow bamboo sticks. Traps need to be emptied daily by shaking into a bucket of soapy water. Bait can be used to increase the effectiveness of your trap. Oatmeal, bran or a drop or so of soy sauce are recommended but I have not tested these. Because of all the extra rain this spring, some of my traps have been less effective than in previous years but now things are drying up, they are back to frequenting my hose pieces.

A friend and fellow Master Gardener takes two rhubarb leaves back to back or rolled loosely. These can be used multiple times. In the morning, she dumps the contents on the driveway and does the 'earwig dance'. This might not be the most efficient cure but it adds a certain level of satisfaction to the process of ridding the garden of earwigs that are eating her plants.

If you are wondering how this pest got its name, a little bit of history is in order. In Elizabethan times, earwigs were found in those massive wigs that were held up with mud. People thought earwigs went into the brain via the ears and caused insanity. The cure they devised in my opinion was worse than the problem. The earwigs were dried, ground into a fine powder, then mixed with 'hare's pisse' and poured into afflicted ears morning noon and night.

Happy earwiggling.

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