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European earwigs— characteristics and control

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Quick Facts

- The common earwigs found in Colorado are an introduced insect that arrived in the state during the 1950 s.
- Occasionally earwigs damage soft parts of plants. However, the main food of earwigs is insects—including plant pests such as aphids.
- Earwigs like to hide in dark, tight-fitting areas during the day and often become nuisance problems as a result.
- Earwigs can be trapped in rolled-up, moistened newspapers.
- Prevention of earwig movement into homes is best achieved by use of insecticide barrier treatments around house foundations.

The European earwig is an insect migrant from Europe that was established in the eastern United States around 1907. This insect rapidly spread across the United States and has occurred in Colorado for the last 30 years.

The European earwig is about 5/8-inch (1.6 centimeters) long, brown with a reddish head. Young earwigs are similar in appearance to adults except that they are smaller in size. A distinctive feature of the insect is the pair of prominent forceps at the rear of the body. Those of the male insect are more strongly curved than those of the female (see Figure 1). This is the only earwig found throughout most of Colorado. In the extreme southern areas of the state a second species may be seen—it is the ring-legged earwig, readily identified by a band on the forelegs.

Earwigs are a common nuisance both indoors and out. During the day they hide in almost any dark, confined space, particularly if it is also rather moist. Indoors, typical hiding places are under rugs or potted plants, in stacks of newspapers, and other similar locations. Outdoors they are commonly found under rocks or stacked wood, in eartips of sweet corn, and under various kinds of debris. Peak problems with earwigs in Colo-

rado tend to occur from mid-July through mid-September.

Earwigs are active at night and feed on a wide variety of materials. They occasionally cause injury to leafy plants such as lettuce and some flower blossoms.

However, earwigs are often associated with injuries caused by other insects. For example, leaves curled by aphids and holes in fruit are favorite hiding places for earwigs.

Earwigs mainly are a nuisance pest. Their reputation is made worse by the widespread fear that many people have regarding these insects. Several tales exist concerning alleged damage of earwigs—such as how they like to crawl into ears or how the forceps cause a painful pinch. These stories have very little basis in fact, although earwigs have been known to cause a mildly painful bite when sat upon or handled. In overall balance, earwigs may actually be considered beneficial since they feed on many plant pests, such as aphids, mites and insect eggs. Earwigs have been purposely used for biological control of some plant pests. However, there are situations where control of earwigs is desired by a homeowner.

Control

Outdoor control of earwigs is best achieved by combining a variety of measures. Movement into homes can be reduced by clearing the area next to the house of debris or other materials that provide favorable shelter for earwigs. This is particularly effective if a relatively dry barrier zone, which is disagreeable to the earwigs, is established around the home.

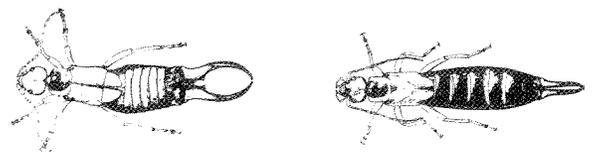


Figure 1: European earwigs (male—left; female—right).

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Limited control of earwigs in a garden can be achieved by trapping and then destroying the insects. An effective trap is moistened, rolled-up newspaper placed in the garden overnight and then disposed of or crushed in the morning.

Insecticides may be used in a variety of ways depending on the situation. Barrier treatments of insecticides sprayed along the exterior foundation walls and as a 1-3-foot swath along adjacent soil can prevent movement of earwigs into the home. Tree trunk banding also may be considered if there are problems with earwigs damaging fruit trees. In the latter case, however, most earwig feeding is on insects such as aphids, which cause leaf curl and produce honeydew. Use of insecticides applied directly to crops is not recommended and should be done strictly in accordance with label directions.

Whole yard treatments of insecticides may be used for earwig control. However, such a practice generally must be considered an extreme response to this problem. Most sod webworm or white grub insecticide applications also will control earwigs.

Baits containing an insecticide also may be used for earwig control. Several commercially available grasshopper or sowbug/slug baits containing carbaryl (Sevin) should be effective for earwigs. These are best sprinkled near or under shelters used by earwigs. Homemade baits also may be effective. Generally these contain oatmeal or bran, moistened slightly with oil or molasses and mixed with a small amount of carbaryl. Applications of insecticides made late in the day

may be most effective since earwigs feed at night.

Table 1: Insecticides useful for controlling earwigs (available to homeowners).

Insecticide	Uses
carbaryl (Sevin)	Baits, direct treatment of most vegetables/fruits, yard treatments, banding of tree trunks, barrier treatments.
chlorpyrifos (Dursban)	Barrier treatments, whole yard treatments, some indoor treatments.
diazinon	Banding of trees, barrier treatments, whole yard treatments, use on some vegetable/fruit crops, some indoor treatments.
propoxur (Baygon)	Some indoor treatments.

Use according to label directions.

Indoor control of earwigs should be considered only in addition to exterior treatment since results will otherwise be unsatisfactory. This includes the sealing of all cracks in the foundation, around windows and other openings to reduce earwig movement into homes.

Individual earwigs found indoors may be vacuumed or spot treated with spray-and-wash indoor cleaners that kill by contact. Such insecticides as chlorpyrifos (Dursban), diazinon and propoxur (Baygon), which are formulated for interior application, also may be used. They should be directed solely to areas in the home used for earwig shelter and not as general household sprays. Closely follow label instructions for these interior uses.