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# IPMINFO

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## Integrated Pest Management for the Home Environment

### TITLE

#### SOWBUGS AND PILLBUGS

Symptoms Damage: Cut roots and small stems, secondary invasion of damaged plant tissue.

When it is a problem: All year round

Hosts: Decaying vegetable matter; other living hosts, if pest population is high.

IPM Techniques: Removal of hiding places, dusts and granular baits.

**Introduction.** Sowbugs and pillbugs are soil pests related to crayfish and other crustaceans; they are not insects. While technically two different species, pillbugs, *Armadillium vulgare* (Latreille), and sowbugs, *Porcellio laevis* (Koch), have few biological and environmental differences and are therefore discussed together here. The most pronounced difference between the two is that, when alarmed, pillbugs have the ability to roll up into a ball, while sowbugs cannot and will try to seek shelter instead. Both organisms prefer damp, protected places such as beneath flowerpots, boards, clods, and rocks and will die quickly if left in a warm, dry place. They are nocturnal and prefer the cool dampness of night to feed on rotting vegetation, manures, and composts. When their populations build up to sufficient numbers, they may injure seedlings by cutting roots and girdling young stems. Root feeding is a particular problem in greenhouses. If another pest has injured a fruit, sowbugs and pillbugs will enter to feed, but they will not initially injure the fruit.

**Life Cycle and Description.** Sowbugs and pillbugs overwinter as adults. Eggs are deposited in a ventral pouch on the female and held for about two months. From 25 to 200 eggs will hatch but remain in the pouch for another six to seven weeks, after which the young leave and do not return. They look like adults but are smaller and generally lighter in color. They may take up to a year to mature, depending on the species and local conditions. There may be up to three generations per year. In greenhouses, they breed continuously so all ages may be found together in one place. They may live for two to three years if the environment is favorable.

Sowbugs and pillbugs have flat, oval bodies about 1/2 inch (12.5 mm) long, which is covered with gray armor-like plates. They have seven pairs of legs on the body, which they use for their principle means of movement.

**Control.** Normally, sowbugs and pillbugs are not a problem around the home and garden. Their biggest enemy is the weather. They need moist conditions; in hot, dry weather, they will burrow

into soil cracks to avoid the dry conditions. They seem to be distasteful to spiders and most insect predators, but birds and some amphibians feed heavily upon them.

Clean cultural practices will alleviate most of the problem. Keep the area clean of debris, boards, grass, and leaf piles to eliminate hiding places. Boxes should be kept off the ground where they absorb moisture and become hiding places. Protect raw wood against rot and moisture absorption with a good wood sealer.

Indoors, sowbugs and pillbugs die quickly unless they find a moist place to live. They can be swept or vacuumed up easily. If they become a problem, keep the foundation and basements dry, ventilate spaces, and fix leaky pipes that may provide needed moisture.

Insecticides are usually not needed to control sow bugs and pillbugs. Complete control is difficult because of their nocturnal habits and secluded hiding places. Baits have had limited effectiveness. Baygon, diazinon and carbaryl are the most effective chemicals, usually in dust or granular form. If the chemical is spread on an area of heavy mulch, water the chemical down into the mulch where the sowbugs live. Be sure to read the label for precautions whenever using insecticides.

#### Bibliography

Complete Guide to Pest Control--With And Without Chemicals, G. Ware, 1980.

Sowbugs And Pillbug, Leaflet 21015. Division of Agricultural Science, University of California, July 1980.

Sunset New Western Gate Book, 1979.