

Sowbugs and Pillbugs

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**Sowbug (above: magnified)
(right: approximate size)**



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**Pillbug (above: magnified)
(right: approximate size)**



Sowbugs and pillbugs are small, grayish-brown creatures, usually found in moist soil or rotting wood. Many people know them as “roly polies.” They are also called wood lice, which is a misnomer because they aren’t lice at all. These creatures are not insects, but are crustaceans and closely related to lobsters, crabs and shrimp. They are the only crustaceans that have adapted to living their entire life on land.

Description

Sowbugs and pillbugs are wingless and are about 1/2-inches long. Their body is composed of seven hardened armored plates, giving them the armadillo-like appearance. Their eyes are well developed and they have seven pairs of legs. The sowbug differs from the pillbug in that it cannot roll into a ball like the pillbug does when it is disturbed. The sowbug has two prominent tail-like appendages which the pillbug does not have.

Life History

The life histories of the sowbugs and pillbugs are similar. They are inactive in the wintertime, but breed throughout the warmer months. Females carry from 7 to 200 eggs in a pouch on the underside of their bodies. After

3 to 7 weeks, the eggs hatch and the young remain in the pouch about 6 weeks. When the young leave the pouch, they begin feeding. Sowbugs and pillbugs breathe by means of gills and require high levels of moisture to keep their gills moist.

Damage

As scavengers, they feed primarily on decaying organic matter. They may feed on tender plants, but the damage is usually insignificant. Sowbugs and pillbugs thrive only in areas of high moisture, and tend to remain hidden under objects during warmer parts of the day. Around buildings they are common in mulch, compost, under boards, stones, pavers, flower pots and other items resting on damp ground.

Sowbugs and pillbugs are most active at night when humidity levels are higher and temperatures are lower. They may invade crawlspaces, damp basements and first floors of houses at ground level. Common entry points include door thresholds — frequently at the base of sliding glass doors — expansion joints and through the hollow block foundation walls. Large numbers found indoors indicates they are breeding outside near the foundation. Because

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Know how. Know now.

sowbugs and pillbugs require high moisture, they cannot survive indoors for more than a few days.

Control

Protecting Plants — To prevent damage to tender plants, eliminate garden debris, leaf piles, fallen fruit and weeds from gardens and growing areas. Use coarse mulch which will allow water to drain easily. Improve air circulation by providing trellises for vines. If possible, raise fruits like strawberries and melons above the ground. Apply diatomaceous earth as a barrier; it will act as a desiccant and may protect plants.

Protecting Structures — The most effective, long-term measure to reduce sowbugs and pillbugs is to minimize moisture and hiding places especially near the foundation. Remove grass clippings and leaves, and heavy accumulations of mulch, boards, stones and other items lying on the ground near the foundation.

Don't allow water to accumulate near the foundation. Divert water away from the foundation wall by making sure gutters, downspouts and splash blocks have been installed and are functioning properly. Slope soil away from the building or, if the area is poorly drained, install drain tile. Repair leaky faucets and air conditioning units. Adjust lawn sprinklers to reduce puddling next to the foundation. To

reduce humidity/moisture in crawl spaces and basements, use a dehumidifier and install a sump pump.

Seal Pest Entry Points — Seal cracks and openings in the outside foundation wall — especially around doors and basement windows. Install tight-fitting door sweeps at the base of all exterior doors. Caulk along the bottom, outside edge and sides of door thresholds. Seal expansion joints where outdoor patios, sunrooms and sidewalks butt against the foundation.

Insecticides — Insecticide applications inside the home are of little value in controlling these pests. Sowbugs and pillbugs coming indoors will die quickly from a lack of moisture. It's simplest and safest to use a broom or vacuum to remove them.

For significant infestations, moisture is the most important contributing factor to sowbug and pillbug survival and should be tackled first. Insecticides, applied outdoors, are not a substitute for eliminating moist breeding areas near the building and sealing entry points; insecticides should only be used as an emergency measure when high numbers of sowbugs and pillbugs are entering the home. Focus residual insecticide treatments on the bottom of exterior doors, around foundation vents and cracks, basement windows, utility openings and underneath siding.