



All Ears for Earwigs

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The earwig is a curious insect pest. It has thread-like antennae on what looks like an ant head, a long and flattened body that moves fast like a cockroach and short beetle-looking wings. What sets them apart are the long, pointy pincers extending from the rear end. It is a debate over how the earwig got its name, but they do not live or lay eggs in human ears.

Identification

The earwig found in Nebraska is the European earwig. The earwig is long, flattened and a dark reddish-brown color with pale legs, wings and antennae. They are often about 5/8" long, which includes their distinct-looking, forceps-like, pincer appendages called cerci. Both males and females possess cerci on the end of their abdomen, which is used in mating rituals, defense against predators and to hunt prey. Earwigs have two pairs of wings but seldom fly. Their hindwings are larger than they appear, membranous, folded and tucked origami-style underneath short, leathery forewings. Immature earwigs resemble smaller versions of the adult, but lack wings.



Male earwig
(approximate size)

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Male earwigs have large, curved cerci compared to the cerci of the female, which are short and straight (shown magnified).

Photos: Jim Kalisch, UNL Dept. of Entomology



Earwigs on a peach

openings. They overwinter as adults and do not reproduce inside.

Prevention

The key to managing earwigs outdoors is to eliminate the damp, cool, dark places around the foundation. This would include cleaning the gutters, fixing the grade, adjusting the downspouts, removing leaf litter and organic matter, reducing vegetation adjacent to the structure and avoiding unnecessary mulch or boards in gardens. It may be a good idea to consider altering the watering schedule so it is not later in the day or evening when earwigs are most active.

To prevent earwigs from getting inside, use caulk, sealant or weather stripping to eliminate pest entry into the building. Reduce the lighting; close to garage doors, entry doors and windows. On occasion, humans will accidentally bring a hitchhiking earwig inside on materials, so shake out line-dried laundry and inspect objects or flowers before bringing them inside.

Treatment

Trapping can be effective to reduce the number of earwigs in the garden. Homeowners can make simple

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smaller insects). Outdoors they are known to damage fruits, flowers, vegetables, shrubs and trees by chewing irregular holes in leaves and roots.

Occasionally they will enter a structure in search of moisture. They are nocturnal, moisture-seeking, crack and crevice dwellers. Indoors, they are often found in basements, bathrooms and laundry rooms, seeking shelter under rugs, mats, baseboards and other materials that hold moisture. They survive by feeding and scavenging on any organic debris.

Habits

Although they are not considered social insects, they aggregate in large groups in the same harborage areas. Moist summers will favor higher populations of earwigs, and lay eggs in soil in the garden beds, under mulch, stones, boards, concrete structures and other debris.

They are most active at night and attracted to lights, which in drier times, draws earwig populations to the exterior of the structure. Earwigs will get in through openings and gaps around doors, windows, cracks in the foundation and utility line/cable

pit fall traps using a shallow tuna fish can and a little oil as bait to catch foraging earwigs. Another trap can be made by leaving a rolled up newspaper in the garden. Putting the captured earwigs in a solution of soapy water will kill them.

To remove earwigs from inside the home, scoop them up (they will not hurt you) or use a vacuum. Consider remedies to decrease the moisture and increase the ventilation in the area where earwigs are found.

This can be done using fans, air conditioners, dehumidifiers, fixing plumbing leaks, hanging up wet bath mats and squeegeeing standing water in tubs/showers to drains.

Insecticide treatments are not recommended indoors, but options exist for outdoor treatments. There are a variety of products sold in hardware stores that have earwigs listed on the label. Always read the instructions and follow the label.



Earwigs in a flower

Jim Kalisch, UNL Dept. of Entomology