Pillbugs and Sowbugs

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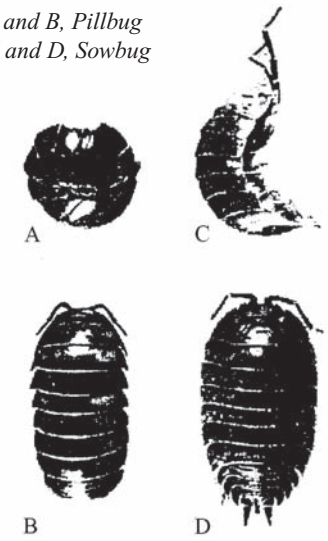
Introduction

Sowbugs and pillbugs are primarily restricted to locations with high humidity and moisture. They feed on decaying vegetable matter. Favorite habitats include leaf piles, grass clippings, pet droppings, old boards and various types of mulches. They can feed on young, tender vegetation or fruit and can damage beans, lettuce, strawberries and other garden crops. They frequently invade damp basements and crawl spaces and may infest potted plants. A heavy infestation indoors generally indicates is a large population outside.

Description

These pests are crustaceans and are more closely related to shrimp and crayfish than insects. They are grayish to black and are about ⅜-inch long when fully grown. They are distinctly segmented with seven pairs of legs. Sowbugs possess two tail-like appendages at the tip of the abdomen and are incapable of rolling into a tight ball. Pillbugs, on the other hand, can roll themselves into a ball but lack abdominal appendages.

A and B, Pillbug
C and D, Sowbug



Control Measures

Products labeled for pillbug and sowbug control include familiar names such as acephate (Orthene) and carbaryl (Sevin) as well as many new products containing synthetic pyrethroids with names such as allethrin, bifenthrin, cyfluthrin, cypermethrin, deltamethrin, esenfenvalerate, lambda-cyhalothrin, permethrin, resmethrin, tetramethrin and tralomethrin. Because there are several hundred products on the market, it is best to visit a local supplier of lawn or home insecticides and look for a product labeled for the pest and location you want to treat.

A homeowner must first decide if the problem can be easily controlled by hand picking or vacuuming to remove individuals. This may be all that is needed if populations are minimal. If populations are high or persistent, use of an insecticide may be justified. Aerosol sprays may be applied directly to pillbugs and sowbugs for quick knock down, but effects are short lived. Longer lasting residual sprays can be sprayed into cracks, crevices and other hiding places, particularly in dark, damp areas. Dusts can be useful for treating wall voids, crawl spaces, and other dry, protected areas.

Because household infestations generally result from high populations outside the home, it usually is difficult to obtain complete control unless the outside premises are treated. When treating outdoors, treat foundation walls, steps, porches, around shrubbery, window wells and sidewalks. In general, insecticides should be applied to form a barrier of 5 to 10 feet around the structure. The treatment should be thorough and applied so insecticide reaches the soil surface. These pests feed and breed in decaying organic matter, so it may be necessary to remove plant mulch, leaves, boards, and compost piles to achieve complete control. In the garden it may help to remove old boards and excess mulch, especially during the off-season. Preplant treatments or preplant soil drenches used for general soil insect control should help protect young seedlings from sowbugs and/or pillbugs. Commercially prepared baits or granules also are available for use on many vegetables and small fruits.

CAUTION: Regardless of the chemical(s) used, for specific directions read and follow the manufacturer's label carefully.

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