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ASK A MASTER GARDENER

Pillbugs and sowbugs

Q UESTION: I get so frustrated because every time I set out my young, tender plants, the roly-polies chomp them down. What can I do to prevent this?

A NSWER: Pillbugs and sowbugs are common garden pests that can wreak havoc on your plants if left unchecked. They can quickly multiply if conditions are favorable.

These nocturnal creepy crawlies that look somewhat like miniature armadillos are often found in moist and shady areas of the garden such as under rocks, leaves, boards or other debris. All are fond of tender shoots and buds and can cause significant damage to plants.

Pillbugs, *Armadillidium* species, and sowbugs, *Porcellio* species, are more closely related to lobsters than to insects. They are soil-dwelling crustaceans that breathe through gills and tend to congregate in moist situations. They have oval-shaped bodies and are typically gray or brown in color.

Sow bugs have a pair of tail-like structures on the back end of their bodies while pillbugs do not. Only pillbugs will roll up into a little ball when disturbed, and it is pillbugs that are sometimes called "roly-polies."

Pillbugs and sowbugs play an important role in the garden ecosystem. They are decomposers and feed on decaying plant material. They help to aerate the soil by digging small tunnels and moving through the earth. This helps to improve the soil structure and makes it easier for plants to



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grow roots.

However, pillbugs and sowbugs can definitely be a nuisance in the garden. They are especially attracted to lettuce, strawberries and young annual flowers. Pillbugs are also known to feed on vegetables such as potatoes, carrots and beets.

One effective method of control is the use of diatomaceous earth. Diatomaceous earth is a fine powder made from the fossilized remains of tiny aquatic organisms. It works by dehydrating the exoskeleton of the bugs, causing them to die. Simply sprinkle the powder around your plants. You will need to reapply it after rain or watering.

While diatomaceous earth is environmentally friendly and is a relatively safe product, it isn't without risk. You will want to avoid breathing it in and getting it on your skin or in your eyes. If you decide to use this, carefully read the label so you know how to use it safely.

Another really simple method of control is to set up some traps. Leave some rolled up newspapers around the garden, and the next morning shake the pests out into soapy water.

A second trap is to place boards or large stones on damp ground around the garden. Then during the day, overturn those large boards and

stones, whisk up the pillbugs or sowbugs and dump them into a container of soapy water.

The best way to control pillbugs and sowbugs is by preventing them from infesting your garden in the first place. Prevention is the first tool in pest management because it is the most effective, least expensive and most environmentally friendly solution.

Here are some tips to help you keep these pests at bay:

1. Keep your garden clean and tidy. Remove any debris from your garden, and keep the soil well-drained.
2. Water your plants early in the morning. This will reduce the moisture levels and will allow the soil to dry by evening which is when these pests become active.

3. Use drip irrigation or furrow irrigation instead of sprinklers.
4. Planting in raised beds or planting boxes may be helpful.

5. Use companion planting to deter pests. For example, planting marigolds or garlic around your plants can help to repel earwigs.

6. Using coarse mulch promotes drainage and can be useful if used under fruits and vegetables (like melons or squash) that lie directly on the ground.

7. Use natural predators to control pests. Ladybugs, lacewings and praying mantises are all natural predators that feed on these pests.

Early intervention is the second tool in pest management. Pay attention to what is going on in your garden and be observant so you can react to problems quickly before the little problem becomes a big problem.

Even though pillbugs and sowbugs are beneficial in the garden, they can also be a real nuisance when you are trying to grow your own food. I hope you are able to reduce the number of pests in your garden to a manageable level and be able to enjoy a beautiful, healthy garden.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or visit 1134 S E Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.

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