

# WIGGED OUT BY **EARWIGS**



PHOTO COURTESY OF PIXABAY

Since earwigs are attracted to moisture, minimize excess moisture in your landscape, watering more thoroughly and deeply, but less often, so the soil surface remains drier.

**QUESTION:** Some of the most hideous insects in my garden are earwigs. I find them where I least expect to and hate them. Are they good for anything?

**ANSWER:** Earwigs are primarily nocturnal insects who prefer to hide during the day. They are outdoor insects usually found in damp areas, such as under mulch, dead leaves, logs and in rotted wood.

Earwigs are omnivores, meaning they feed on both plant and animal material.

Earwigs are somewhat beneficial ecologically in gardens as scavengers; they are helpful in compost piles, eating a variety of dead and living organisms including aphids, plant lice, insect eggs and even bluebottle flies.

However, if insects are scarce, they will turn their attention to the flower blossoms of fruits and vegetables – making the produce inedible – or the roots of planted flowers. In fact, with ballooning earwig populations, they became such a pest in 1924 that the city of Portland declared a state of emergency.

The name earwig, which literally means “ear creature,” originated from the widespread superstition that these insects crawl into the ears of sleeping people. Even worse, people believed that once the earwig

gained access into the human ear, it could bore into the brain.

Although this superstition is not true, it is not hard to see why we find them creepy. These insects are menacing-looking but totally harmless in reality.

Earwigs belong to their own insect order called Dermaptera, a reference to their short, smooth forewings. There are about 1800 earwig species in the world, 22 in the United States.

The most common earwig in Oregon is the European earwig



Female earwigs can be identified by their straight pinchers.



**Debby Finley**  
Master Gardener

(Forficula Auricularia).

Earwigs are little more than one inch long, with long slender antennae and a long pincher at the rear. Males have curved pinchers while females have straight pinchers.

They use these forceps or pinchers mainly as protective weapons, but they also use them to capture prey. Earwigs might pinch lightly but they are not able to break human skin.

Earwigs live approximately one year. Adult European earwigs mate in late summer or early fall before establishing subterranean nests. Female earwigs may deposit from 50-90 eggs into the ground in the fall and then hibernate during the winter.

The males die off before the winter and the young earwigs, which resemble the adults, develop during the summer months. Unusual to insects, female earwigs show maternal care for their eggs and for their early nymphs.

Earwig damage may resemble caterpillar damage. Damaged seedlings may be missing all or parts of their leaves. You might also notice tiny black pellets on the leaves or

around your plants. It is likely that this is insect poop or frass, suggesting earwigs. To confirm that earwigs are causing the damage, go out at night with a flashlight and observe the pests in action.

If you find your home invaded by earwigs, make sure any decaying vegetable matter or piles of leaves are removed from around the house. Repair any broken irrigation systems or broken downspouts that might create a moist habitat.

Earwigs hate vinegar. Try wiping all entrance doors and windows with a concentrated vinegar solution.

Try trapping earwigs by setting out rolled up newspapers or place old tuna fish cans baited with fish or vegetable oil. Set them out during the evening in areas you’ve noticed earwigs in your garden. In the morning, shake the traps out into a pail of soapy water to remove and kill the insects.

Since earwigs are attracted to moisture, minimize excess moisture in your landscape, watering more thoroughly and deeply, but less often, so the soil surface remains drier.

*Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu) or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 S E Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the Oregon State University Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*