

"Bug of the Month"

Anyone who keeps potted plants indoors, or works at all in a garden or on a lawn has probably come in contact with the European earwig (*Forficula auricularia*). It invaded the United States in the early 1900s, somewhere on the west coast, possibly in Seattle, and has since spread throughout the western states, New England and the Mid-Atlantic States, where it has become the predominant species of earwig.

WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE? Earwigs are elongate, flattened insects that range in color from red-brown to black and are easily identified by the forcep-like appendages (pincers) on the end of the abdomen. The forceps (cerci) of the male are unequal in length and more strongly curved than the females, which are more straight-sided. When wings are present, the first pair is hard, short and "beetle-like," while the second pair is membranous, fan or "ear" shaped and is kept folded under the first pair of wings. The European earwig ranges in size from ¼ to 1 ¼ inch long.

WHAT DO THEY DO? The name earwig is derived from the European superstition that the insect enters the ear of a sleeping person and bores into the brain. This is universally accepted among entomologists as "balderdash." Other than an occasional pinch, earwigs cannot harm humans and are not particularly fond of devouring a human brain. The European earwig feeds on other insects, plants, ripe fruit, and



garbage. Large populations can cause serious damage to some plants, particularly on clover, dahlias, zinnias, butterfly bush, hollyhock, lettuce, strawberry, celery, potatoes, roses, seedling beans, beets and tender grass shoots. Sweet corn can be damaged from feeding on the silk. On the beneficial side, earwigs also feed on armyworms, aphids, mites and scales. The earwig is a nocturnal insect. During the day, it hides in garden plants, shrubbery, woodpiles, along fences, at the base of trees, and behind loose boards on buildings. The female lays 50-90 shiny white eggs, each about 1.5 mm in length, in the ground in the fall. Females then hibernate and in the spring take care of the nymphs in their early stages. Some females may produce a second brood in the spring. The nymphs become adults in

late August and early October, feed, mate and begin to construct nests in the soil. Rich garden soil with a southern exposure is a favorite place for nest construction.

MANAGEMENT

To prevent entry of earwigs indoors, the best control is done outdoors.

- Reduce outside lighting that is attractive to earwigs, use sodium vapor yellow lights.
- Remove leaf litter, stones, and mulches near foundations.
- Keep shrubs trimmed.
- Caulk and repair cracks and crevices.
- Ensure that doors, windows and screens fit tightly.
- Rain gutters and spouts should carry water away from the house foundation.
- Eliminate damp, moist conditions in crawl spaces under houses, around faucets, around air-conditioning units and along house foundations.
- Inspect plants, pots, fire wood, and other materials that have sat outdoors before bringing them inside.
- Treat with labeled insecticide as last resort only.

MORE QUESTIONS? Please do not hesitate to give your "Bug Docs" a call at com.: (360) 315-4450, DSN: 322-4450 or you can e-mail us at ndveccmei@pnw.med.navy.mil.