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# Sowbugs, Millipedes, and Centipedes in the Home

Most Minnesotans have observed arthropods (jointed-foot animals) in their homes, gardens, or lawns. None is harmful to items within the home, but their presence can be disturbing to some people. The habitat of sowbugs, millipedes, and centipedes is usually moist, decaying leaf litter or other plant material lying just outside the building foundation. In this latter situation we would have to consider them a beneficial group of animals.

During the fall and occasionally during the summer, millipedes and sowbugs leave the soil and crawl into houses. Millipedes and sowbugs most often enter the basement but may crawl up walls to reach the first floor. This habit seems to be due to two things. First, in the fall millipedes and sowbugs seek protected places to overwinter. Second, excessive rainfall or ground moisture forces the millipedes and sowbugs out of natural living quarters in the soil to areas of less moisture.

Millipedes and sowbugs feed on decaying vegetable matter and on small roots and green leaves that may be on the ground. Potatoes or other vegetables being stored in the basement also provide food, but millipedes and sowbugs will not attack clothes, fabrics, or dry stored cereals.

## SOWBUGS

The sowbug (figure 1) is a land crustacean distantly related to lobster, crab, and crayfish. It is uniformly brownish-gray and may reach a ¾-inch length. It resembles a tiny turtle with overlapping plates on its back.

Because its breathing apparatus and body structure require a moist atmosphere, it can only survive where it is damp. Its food consists of decaying organic matter. To survive within a home, it needs both a moist location and some type of decaying organic matter.

**Figure 1. Sowbug, twice natural size.**

## MILLIPEDES

The millipede is a dark brown, worm-like creature (figure 2) with many short legs. It can be about 1 to 1½ inches long and has a characteristic habit of curling up tightly when touched or handled. Millipedes are most active at night and commonly hide beneath objects where it is dark and damp.

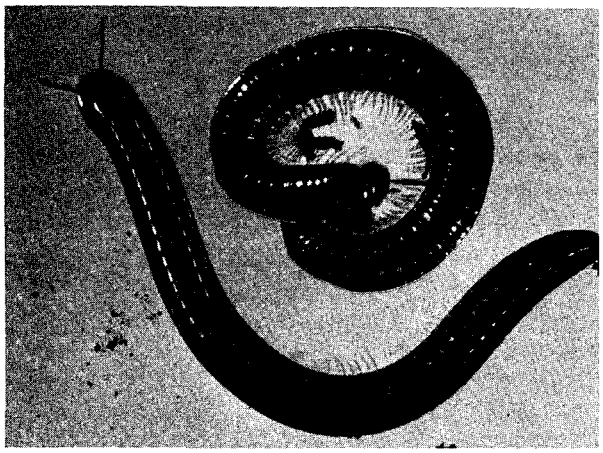

**Figure 2. Millipedes, twice natural size.**

## CENTIPEDES

The centipede found in homes is called the house centipede (figure 3). When nearly or full grown, it is more than an inch long. Its body is wormlike but has 15 pairs of long, jointed legs attached along the sides. A pair of long, slender feelers extends forward. The body is flattened, but this may not be so evident when the centipede is standing or running. The body is grayish or grayish-yellow marked with three dark longitudinal stripes, visible from above. Each leg is encircled with dark and white bands.

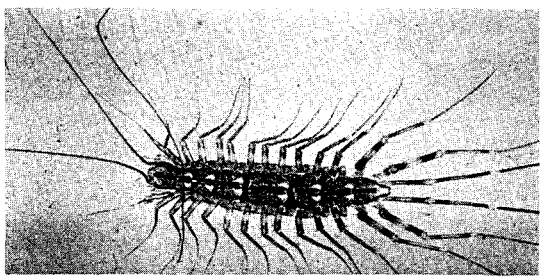

**Figure 3. House centipede, twice natural size.**

Centipedes can move quickly and are usually detected darting across an open room toward a dark area where it is difficult to find them.

Centipedes are predators and feed on small, living creatures

such as spiders and carpet beetle larvae. In this sense they are beneficial and should not be destroyed in locations away from the house.

The centipede's jaws are small and cannot break through human skin easily. In a few instances, where a small bite has been inflicted, a little swelling resulted and the pain reportedly was no worse than a bee sting. Since the centipede is very shy, biting is rare and would not be expected unless the centipede were pressed or squeezed.

## CONTROL

### Biological and Cultural Control

Leaf litter and decaying vegetation, which provide food and shelter for sowbugs and millipedes, should be removed from around the foundation. Foundation plantings should be trimmed and cleaned up so that ventilation will permit the soil to dry rapidly near the foundation.

When watering the soil near the house, allow it to dry before repeated soakings. Roughening the soil surface will aid in holding water and will also work plant material into the soil where it is unavailable to sowbugs or millipedes.

The above measures will reduce these and insect populations, which in turn will reduce numbers of the centipedes that utilize them for food.

Cracks in basement walls at and near ground level should be caulked and other openings closed early in the fall.

Within the home a persistent infestation of sowbugs or millipedes indicates both excessive moisture and the presence of a food source. The use of some method to dry the basement is the best long-term control measure. Sometimes a small electric fan will move the air sufficiently to accomplish this.

The continued presence of house centipedes can indicate another insect is abundant enough to serve as a food supply. Thus control of spiders, carpet beetles, or other prey may serve as the best control for centipedes.

### Chemical Control

A 2 percent and 5 percent granule formulation of diazinon (Spectracide) is available for use against sowbugs and millipedes around foundations and in lawns. A 5-foot-wide band treatment next to the foundation is desirable and would require 8 ounces of 2 percent granular applied to an area 5 by 20 feet.

A 1 percent suspension of carbaryl (Sevin) or a 4 percent dust can be applied *to the soil* for control of millipedes.

A 5 percent emulsion of a refined grade of malathion or a 2 percent preparation in water or refined oil can be applied to walls, shelving, and floors. The treatment should be in the form of a coarse spray or brush-on application.

Some commercially prepared sprays may contain an additional insecticide known as pyrethrins. This would be an excellent combination with any one of the previously mentioned insecticides.



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