

# Earwigs



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Fierce-looking with forcepslike pincers, earwigs were once thought to take refuge in the ears of sleeping persons. More recently, they were believed to be very destructive to vegetable and flower gardens. New research has shown, however, that earwigs are not as destructive as once thought and sometimes are even considered beneficial.

## Identification

The adult European earwig, *Forficula auricularia*, is brown in color and about 5/8-inch long, with forcepslike pincers at end of its abdomen. Earwigs use their pincers to hold live prey; females use their pincers to defend their nests. Females have straight pincers while the pincers of the males are curved and come in two sizes. Male pincer size is thought to be related to the selection of mates by females.

Although earwigs have two pairs of wings, the longer hind pair is normally kept tucked under the short front pair; they rarely fly. Immature earwigs, or nymphs, resemble smaller versions of the adults.

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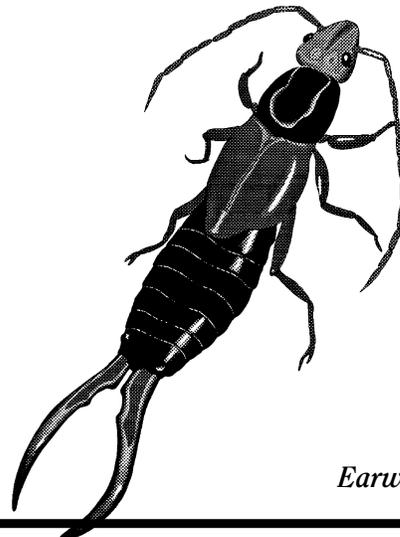
## Biology and Habits

Earwigs are omnivorous, meaning that they feed on a wide variety of plant and animal material, such as dead or live vegetation and dead or live insects. In gardens earwigs sometimes cause

minor damage to tender plant seedlings. Much damage once attributed to earwigs is now believed to be caused by snails, slugs, cutworms, and other pests. Earwigs are active at night and hide during the day in such places as under bark mulch, tree bark, rocks, or boards. Each female lays about 50 eggs in a shallow nest in the ground and stays with and guards her eggs and young.

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Earwigs become a nuisance pest when they enter houses, their fierce appearance and foul smell only increasing their repugnance to homeowners. Infestations inside houses usually occur in late summer or fall when earwigs take refuge in moist, dark cracks and crevices in bathrooms or kitchens.



Earwig

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## Prevention Methods

To prevent earwigs from getting into your house, caulk cracks and crevices and make sure that window and door screens fit tightly and are in good repair. Remove earwig harborages by gathering up old boards and leaf litter next to your house and trimming back shrubbery.

*Since earwigs prefer moist areas, a chronic infestation may indicate a drainage problem or moisture leak somewhere in or around the house.*

Relocate firewood piles so that they are off the ground and away from the house. Bark mulch

next to houses often invites large earwig populations—keep mulch depths to no more than 2 inches. If all else fails, a vegetation-free zone about 2 feet wide around your house should help to keep the earwigs at bay.

## Control Strategies

Vacuum up any earwigs that do get indoors. Control earwigs in and around houses with pyrethrin sprays or boric acid applied to cracks and crevices. Since earwigs prefer moist areas, a chronic infestation may indicate a drainage problem or moisture leak somewhere in or around the house.

Controlling earwigs in gardens is often unnecessary. A nighttime inspection by flashlight may reveal the real offenders. Often a thick compost mulch will provide control by supplying the earwigs with other food so that they leave tender plants alone.

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