

Millipedes and Centipedes

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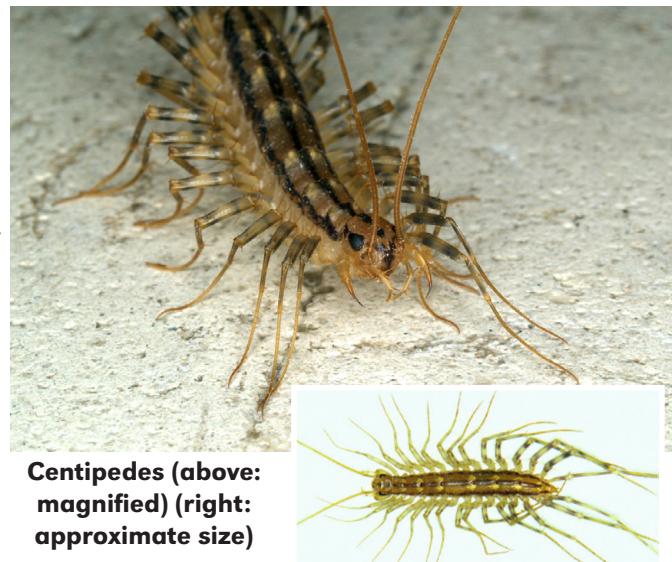
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Millipedes and centipedes are not insects, but are closely related arthropods. Both of these groups of invertebrates have long, segmented bodies with either one pair (centipedes) or two pairs (millipedes) of legs on each segment. Centipedes and millipedes are also similar in that they live in humid locations and are sensitive to desiccation. When outdoors, centipedes and millipedes are usually inconspicuous. They become pests when they invade our homes.

Millipedes

Millipedes or “thousand leggers” have two pairs of legs per body segment. Some people mistakenly refer to them as “wireworms,” but a wireworm is the larval stage of a group of beetles that feeds on roots of plants. Millipedes are usually dark brown to black in color and have elongated cylindrical bodies. They coil up when disturbed, similar to the behavior exhibited by pillbugs, a related invertebrate. They have a hard exoskeleton, which “crunches” if stepped on. Most species protect themselves by having glands that secrete an unpleasant odor.

Millipedes are herbivorous or detritivores and feed on living or damp or decaying vegetation. They are found in damp or moist places, like mulch. Millipedes can some-

times attack vegetable plants. Overmulching, overwatering and/or adding organic fertilizers (manure) to soil can be a contributing factor to abundant populations.

Migrations — Most of the time, people don’t see millipedes because they stay in leaf litter, mulch or the soil. Millipedes occasionally wander into homes, but they usually die because of dry indoor conditions.

On occasion and unpredictably, masses of millipedes begin migrating that brings hundreds, even thousands of millipedes into yards and homes and other structures. These migrations are more extreme in rural areas and often occur in the fall, but they have also been observed in the spring or summer. Sometimes it seems the migration occurs during a dry period following a build-up of the millipede population in the spring. Other times, millipedes seem to respond to extreme moisture, when heavy rains raise water levels in the soil and they seek higher ground so they don’t drown.

These migrations and home invasions are very disturbing to people who report thousands of millipedes crawling up the house and even entering on upper levels.

Millipedes are attracted to street, yard and porch lights.

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Management — Invading millipedes stress homeowners, but are primarily a nuisance. They do not bite, sting, cause structural damage, contaminate foodstuffs or eat fibers. Instead of using a pesticide inside the home, our recommendation is for homeowners to simply vacuum millipedes found indoors.

Prevent entry of millipedes and other invading pests:

- Seal cracks and crevices to prevent entry.
- Install tight-fitting door sweeps — done prior to the next migration.

Make the environment around your home less conducive to millipedes:

- Remove organic debris or mulch materials near your home.
- Remove ground cover near the house.
- Dethatch the lawn and keep it mowed short.
- Turn off outdoor lights or use yellow bulbs and close draperies during millipede migrations.

Experts suggest using wettable powder (WP) and microencapsulated formulations of pyrethroid insecticides. However, people — even pest control companies — who have sprayed migrating millipedes say their treatment did not kill millipedes or even seemed to slow them. This could be because millipedes have a thick exoskeleton which prevents insecticide absorption.

Centipedes

Centipedes are elongated, flattened arthropods with one pair of legs on each body segments. They have a pair of long slender antennae on their head and a very long pair of legs on the tail end of the body.

Worldwide there are about 3,000 described centipede species, but the house centipede (*Scutigerida coleoptrata*) is the species most likely found inside homes. It has light- and dark-banded legs, and its body is a dirty yellow with three longitudinal, dark stripes.

Centipedes have a pair of poison claws behind the head and use the poison to paralyze their prey, usually small insects.

The jaws of centipedes are weak and can rarely penetrate human skin. The rare individuals who are bitten may experience localized swelling and pain no worse than a bee sting.

The house centipede is found throughout the United States. This centipede can be found outside under stones, boards or sticks or beneath moist leaf litter and other organic matter. When disturbed, centipedes move swiftly toward darkened hiding places. When found in homes, they are often found in damp locations, like moist basements, damp closets and in bathrooms, feeding on insects. House centipedes readily feed on silverfish, firebrats, carpet beetle larvae, cockroaches, spiders and other small arthropods.

Management — The safest and most environmentally sound way to deal with an occasional centipede is to swat it and discard in the trash.

Reduce the humidity by using dehumidifiers. Grade the soil around the building to facilitate water movement away from the foundation. Fix leaky foundations.

Reduce the centipede food source. Purchase and use glueboards to determine what other types of arthropods are living in your house. Place them in damp locations where you have seen centipedes. If you reduce insect populations feeding the centipedes, you will reduce the centipede population, as well.

Reduce entry into the structure by sealing cracks and crevices in concrete slabs and block walls and around basement windows. Seal sump pump covers with screen and caulk.