

## **Earwigs** **by Lloyd Eighme, retired entomologist**

Common names have strange origins. Do earwigs crawl into people's ears or hide under their wigs? I have never heard of that happening, have you? They do have forceps or pinchers at the tail end that they try to use in self defense, but they are not very strong and cause more fright than damage.

Earwigs are most active at night and hide during the day. They prefer cool, moist hiding places such as mulch or bark. They also take cover inside houses where they are more of a nuisance than a hazard. Their food is varied consisting of the softer parts of green plants, fruits, and other insects. They have actually been used as a biological control for aphids on fruit trees.

The eggs are laid in early summer in damp protected spots. The female earwig guards the eggs and protects the young ones for several weeks after they hatch or until they are able to forage for food on their own. That is why you may find a whole colony of small earwigs under a board or in some protected spot. The young ones are just smaller versions of the adults and they grow by molting several times until they are mature. There is only one generation per season in our area.

Earwigs do have wings, but the common European earwig we see mostly in our area are not known to fly. The wings are thin and membranous and are kept tightly folded under the short wing covers. Their legs are well developed for crawling and they can move considerable distances at night from their daytime hiding places. In the fall when apples are ripe they find cracks around the stem end of an apple on the tree or cracks in the scabby spots and feed on the apples. Eventually they eat enough to make a cavity under the apple skin and stay there during the daytime also where you may find them when you bite into a ripe apple.

Mechanical control of earwigs is made possible by their habit of hiding in cool moist places during the day. Boards, cardboard or other flat objects can be placed near the garden as traps where earwigs will congregate. They can be destroyed there by whatever method you choose; stomping, poisoning, some people even douse them with boiling water. There are some biological controls for earwigs. After the European earwig was introduced to North America and became a pest in the Pacific Northwest, a tachinid fly parasite was introduced that has become well established in our area and helps control the earwig populations. There are also parasitic nematodes and fungal diseases, but all of these biological controls together will not eliminate the earwigs. If they did do away with the earwigs completely then what would the parasites eat?

Earwigs can do some damage in the garden. They chew on small, tender leaves of seedlings. They may chew into soft fruits like strawberries. If you need to control them, look for information in EB 1199 and EB 1206.



The European Earwig common in our area. The male has curved pinchers.



Earwigs have wings under short wing covers. The female has straight pinchers.