

Springtails by Lloyd Eighme, retired entomologist

Many insects are small enough to be overlooked by most people until the insect becomes very abundant in one spot. That is true of springtails which are from 1/16-1/4 inch in length. They need abundant moisture so are often hidden in dense foliage, leaf litter or damp soil. The damp climate of the Pacific Northwest is favorable to springtails and we have many different kinds in many different habitats. People find them on damp wooden porches, in barns and outbuildings, in puddles and on the beach in sea wrack. Most springtails are of no economic importance, but can be a nuisance when they become very abundant. Most springtails jump when disturbed which attracts our attention, especially when they are massed together in one spot. They jump by means of a spring-like appendage or tail that is held under the abdomen by a clasp and released under tension, tossing them up into the air. A springtail less than 1/4 inch in body length can leap 3-4 inches. Quite a feat for a creature so small. Mild and wet winter days often bring springtails out in swarms where they may cover damp soil or the surface of a puddle of water. They come in many colors from black to white including brown, green, blue or purple.

Springtails are one of the most abundant insects in the soil and play an important role in recycling soil nutrients by feeding on decayed organic matter in the upper soil layers. A few may cause some damage by feeding on sprouting seeds in the garden, greenhouse or mushroom cellar. The large glaciers and snowfields in our mountains are the home of a springtail that feeds on the algae that grows there and pollen that is blown there by the wind. They are called snow fleas because they jump. The dark blue pigment in their bodies collects enough energy from the sun to raise their body temperature above that of the snow or ice they live on. They may also be found on the late winter snow in forested areas. They are sometimes a nuisance when they find their way into the sugar maple sap buckets. They like sweets too!

There is very little information about springtails in the gardening books because they are of no great importance to gardeners. However, when people who do not know insects very well, see them in their yard and garden, they are concerned and want to know if they will do any damage. Specimens of springtails are brought to the Master Gardener clinic for identification and information about how to control them. That is why it is important for Master Gardeners to learn to recognize as many different kinds of insects as they can so they can tell people which ones are harmless. Maybe you can help people avoid using pesticides when it is not necessary to do so.



Typical Springtail