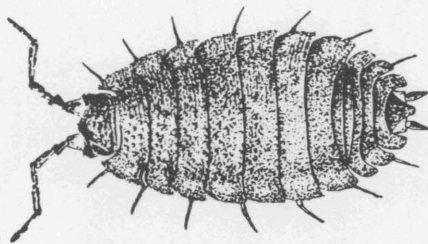




# SOWBUGS AND PILLBUGS

Nick L. Wilson\*

Sowbugs and pillbugs are frequent inhabitants of the urban landscape and commonly enter homes. They are not really insects but are more closely related to shrimp and crayfish. Although they benefit nature by breaking down organic matter and returning it to the soil, they may become a nuisance in a home.



**Sowbug.**

## Description

These creatures have seven pairs of legs, a pair of antennae, breathing gills and segmented, shell-like bodies. They are oval,  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch long, and gray to brown in color. A common sowbug has two tail-like appendages and does not roll into a ball when disturbed; the pillbug rolls up and lacks these appendages.

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## Biology

Up to 75 eggs hatch in a brood pouch on the underside of the female. The hatching young resemble adults and remain in the pouch until capable of self-care. Sowbugs and pillbugs molt two or three times during their growth and develop to adulthood in approximately a year. Adults may live approximately two years.

## Habitat and Damage

Sowbugs and pillbugs normally live outdoors. They may become pests in and around residences where trash, rocks, mulch or decaying leaf litter accumulates. Because they have difficulty maintaining body moisture, they must remain beneath objects on damp ground or even below ground during the day. They may even group together in masses to reduce water loss. At night they take advantage of the lower temperatures and more humid conditions and will travel in the open.

Both of these feed on decaying organic matter. Occasionally they will feed on and injure young plants or their roots. They are most attracted to moist vegetable matter and often eat overripe fruit lying on the ground. Piles of leaves and grass clippings provide both moist hiding places and food. Boxes, boards, flower pots and trash lying on soil also provide ideal living quarters for them. Sowbugs and pillbugs sometimes enter houses where they do no damage and usually cannot survive for long. Slab floors and sliding doors increase the likelihood of entry.

## Control

### *Cultural and Mechanical*

Sanitation is the most important step in control. Eliminating leaves, grass clippings, piles of mulch, old boards, boxes, etc. will remove shelter and food.

Proper ventilation of crawl spaces under buildings will eliminate a common source of excessive moisture. Raise flower pots and planters to allow air to pass under them and reduce moisture.

Mechanical exclusion from homes is successful. Possible points of entry should be sealed or blocked: door sills, windows below grade and cracks in foundations or brick facings. Weather stripping or caulking may be sufficient.

### *Chemical*

**Outdoors** • Apply residual pesticide treatments to and near foundation walls, to damp areas surrounding or near buildings and to the crawl spaces underneath them. Common garden insecticides containing chlorpyrifos, carbaryl, diazinon, malathion or propoxur applied as sprays or dust are effective. Treatment of peat moss, leaves, etc. used as mulches is particularly important. Subsequent sprinkling will carry the insecticide down into the soil where these crustaceans hide. For specific dosages and methods, always read and follow pesticide labels carefully.

**Indoors** • Pillbugs and sowbugs found indoors should be removed by hand collecting or vacuuming. Control efforts should be centered around preventing their entry. Residual insecticides are usually not effective because of the large areas to be covered.

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