# EARWIG INVASION

I have received an unusually large number of telephone calls regarding this common pest. Normally earwigs are only considered a minor nuisance. This season their population exploded and when that happens damage to annual flowers, seedling vegetables, fruit and perennials plants is more significant. They often strip off every leaf on young seedlings leaving only the stem. Frederick County residents have reported loosing entire flower beds overnight after waking to find only stems remaining where just the day before they planted flowers. Some people have had flower seedlings picked clean overnight while still in their packages as they lay on the patio waiting to be planted. Earwigs are mostly nocturnal, therefore it is normal for damage to occur overnight. When high populations develop expect to find more of these pests in your home.

Earwigs are about 3/4 of an inch long with red/brown bodies. They have 2 pairs of wings but move by crawling. The most significant identifying characteristic is the set of pincers (called cerci) at the tail end of the body. The pincers look like ice tongs and can identify the sex of the earwig, males have curved cerci, females are straight. Female earwigs lay their eggs in soil and then guard them and the young until they are able to protect themselves. Environmental conditions determine the time required for eggs to hatch and young to mature. Once the female leaves her young she will go and lay more eggs, multiple generations per season are possible. This year multiple generations did occur which led to the high populations and significant damage being experienced.

Earwigs prefer dark, moist, and confined places. They can be found in wood piles, mulch, compost heaps, under rocks, and in plant debris. They are predators first, eating aphids, slugs, insect larva, and other slow moving insects. When those food sources are scarce earwigs will eat plants.

***Control -***

- Keep wood and other debris away from the house.
- Apply caulk as needed to close gaps at door sills and sliding glass doors.
- Compost piles should be away from vegetable gardens and bedding plants.
- Traps can be set in gardens where earwigs are a problem. Place empty tuna fish cans filled with ½ an inch of vegetable oil around the garden. Check traps daily. Dump earwigs from full traps into soapy water to kill them, then re-fill with oil and replace the trap in the garden.
- Insecticide sprays are not recommended because earwigs are nocturnal.
- Use baits containing *Baygon* or *Diazinon* for large populations. Always follow label directions when applying pesticides. Do not use these products around vegetable plants and do not use pesticides indoors.

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***Well Contamination -***
Bacteria is the most common cause of well water contamination. Earwigs will search out cool, moist environments and often enter wells through the air vent in the well cap. Once inside they fall into the water and die and coliform bacteria is produced as they decompose. To reduce the chance of insect contamination keep the area around your well casing clear of mulch and debris. Mound the soil around the casing to allow water to runoff instead of sitting creating a puddle that attracts insects. The most important prevention procedure is determining the type of well cap you have. The recommended type is called a *vermin-proof* well cap. It has a screen in the air vent that prevents insects from entering the well while allowing air circulation. If there is no screen in your well cap replace it with the vermin proof type.

The Frederick County Health Department recommends annual well water testing. If your well is contaminated with bacteria the Health Department can provide you with information on proper chlorinating techniques to de-contaminate the well. For more information on wells and water testing contact:
***Frederick County Health Department***
*Environmental Health Services*
*Water Quality Branch*
*350 Montevue Lane*
*Frederick, MD 21702*
(301) 694-1705

For more information on the earwig, visit
Earwigs

http://www.hgic.umd.edu/_media/documents/hg4_000.pdf

*For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, 301- 600-1596, or visit http://www.frederick.umd.edu/. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.*