

# Earwigs

Have you been strolling through your garden, spied a particularly lovely rose blossom, and as you reach out and deeply inhale the sweet fragrance of the bloom, out comes an earwig, almost crawling up your nose? Yuk! That's almost as bad as the supposed genesis of the name earwig - the myth that these creepy insects would crawl into sleeping people's ears and tunnel into their brain. Who are these creatures and what are they doing in my roses? Are they bad bugs or beneficials? Read on, then you decide.



Earwigs are nocturnal and communal creatures; they gather during the day in moist, dark, tight hiding places (sometimes, unfortunately, those are in your rose blooms) - you may see them in large numbers under rocks or stones. The adult female earwig lays her eggs in masses in burrows in protected places and carefully guards them until they hatch.

The plant damage is done by their chewing mouthparts, not by the ominous pinchers found at their tail end. They are generally scavengers but feed on plants when it suits them. They eat both living and dead tissues of a great many different plants and insects; they may eat a rose petal or two, and particularly like to eat the stamens. They can also be in or on your roses cleaning up the aphids. Since they're not particularly discriminating, they consume both insect pests and beneficials. While it is true that earwigs consume a lot of pest insects and their feeding contributes to the breakdown of dead, organic material, thus improving the soil, they can also overrun a garden and make mincemeat out of your flowers and vegetables (especially young transplants).

Adult earwigs, sometimes called pincerbugs, are about an inch long and brown or reddish-brown in color with rear pinchers (their trademark). The pinchers are used by females to defend their families against predators. Their body is quite maneuverable and other than an occasional weak pinch from their ferocious-looking pinchers (if mishandled), earwigs don't hurt humans. However, they can emit a foul-smelling, yellowish brown liquid from special glands when threatened.

Control of these creatures is not easy, and you need to decide if you can tolerate the bit of damage they do in exchange for their potentially beneficial role. If you are concerned about the appearance of your flowers and vegetables, the best control is keeping plants strong and healthy enough to withstand a little nibbling. Good garden sanitation is also important in order to remove hiding places.

If you want to trap them, place hollow pieces of bamboo, a length of old garden hose, or rolled up newspapers on shaded, moist soil - they will seek shelter in these so that you can simply toss them into a bucket of water and drown them, or dispose in a garbage can sitting in bright sunlight. Alternatively, shallow containers filled with vegetable oil or soapy water can be buried up to their rim in your garden, where earwigs, and probably the odd slug or other bug will drown in the liquid.

Keep in mind the beneficial predatory role earwigs can play in the garden and make an effort to reduce their numbers only when nighttime checks definitely show them to be causing intolerable damage to your plants.

*By Nanette Londeree, Master Rosarian*