

INSIDE GRUNDY COUNTY
By Bill Arndorfer
Butler-Grundy County Extension Educator
October 8, 2010

This week's column is about two insects; millipedes and the minute pirate bug. I have had several calls over the last few days about millipedes; those little dark brown, slow-crawling, round-bodied insects with two sets of legs on each body segment. They often curl up into a tight "C" shape and remain motionless when touched. The body is long and cylindrical.

Millipedes live outdoors in damp areas; under leaves, needles and dead plant debris or in cracks and crevices. They feed on damp and decaying vegetable matter and are beneficial as "recyclers" of organic matter. However, they become a pest when they migrate into homes. Millipedes are usually found in the garage, basement or lowest level of the house. They are most active at night and usually hide during the day in cracks and other moist locations.

Millipedes are harmless; they do not feed upon building structures or furnishings and they cannot bite or sting. Millipedes cannot reproduce indoors. All millipedes found inside wandered in by 'accident'. Keep millipedes outside by sealing cracks, gaps and other points of entry around windows and doors and in foundation walls. Removing organic matter, such as plant mulch and dead leaves, from against the house may help.

Insecticides are of limited benefit in controlling millipedes because of the protected areas where they originate and because of the long distances they migrate. Millipedes migrate long distances during certain times of the year (commonly in spring or fall). Therefore, treatment near the house may have no effect.

The indoor use of household insecticides provides little if any benefit. Millipedes that wander indoors usually die in a short time because of the dryness. Sweeping or vacuuming up the 'invaders' and discarding them is the best option.

You may have recently encountered the minute pirate bug; you know the little bug with the 'big bite'. These small, obscure insects known as the minute pirate bugs make their presence known in a very convincing manner by biting with an impact that is out of proportion with their size.

They are about one fifth of an inch long, oval to triangular in shape, somewhat flattened and black with whitish markings on the back. They are beneficial as predators, feeding on small insects and the eggs of other insects. They are present all summer in fields, woodlands, gardens and landscapes. When they migrate from fields and woodlands they begin their disagreeable behavior of biting humans. Their bite is surprisingly painful for such a small insect. However, they do not feed on blood or inject a venom or saliva.

One consolation - the bugs are not quick to fly following biting, so once they have your attention you can easily eliminate them. Control of minute pirate bugs is not practical. Wearing dark clothing on very warm days when pirate bugs are abundant may help. Repellents are generally not effective.

If you would like to learn more about these insects, contact the Grundy office of ISU Extension at 319-824-6979.