

Community IPM

House Centipedes: Lots of Legs, but not a Hundred

House centipedes are predatory arthropods that can be found both indoors and outdoors. They prefer damp places, including basements, bathrooms and even pots of over-watered plants, where they feed on insects and spiders. As predators of other arthropods, they can be considered a beneficial organism, but are most often considered a nuisance pest when present in the home.

Did you know ... ?

- **By the Numbers:** There are approximately 8,000 species of centipedes.
- **Form-ally Speaking:** Centipedes come in a variety of forms and sizes. Depending on the species they can be red, brown, black, white, orange, or yellow. Some species are shorter than an inch, while tropical species can be up to a foot in length!
- **Preying on the Predators:** Larger centipedes can feed on mice, toads, and even birds.
- **Preference or Requirement?** Centipedes prefer moist areas because they lack a waxy exoskeleton. In dry areas, centipedes can die from desiccation or drying out.

Identification

Adult house centipedes measure one to two inches in length, but may appear larger because of their 15 pair of long legs. House centipedes are yellow-gray in color, with three black stripes that span the length of the body, and black bands on their legs. The last pair of legs is very long and is modified to hold onto prey items. These and other legs can be detached defensively if grasped by a predator. House centipedes hunt with their large compound eyes, are fast runners, and are adept at staying hidden.

Biology

As a group, centipedes are highly predaceous arthropods that are most active at night. They are able to squeeze through narrow openings to enter structures, while numerous legs provide speed to chase down prey. They capture smaller arthropods with their hind legs and inject venom to subdue their prey. House centipedes are said to have weak mandibles, but can pierce the skin and inject venom when handled roughly by humans. Bites are said to feel like a bee sting, causing minor swelling and irritation.



Common House Centipede (*Scutigera coleoptrata* Linnaeus). Photo: G. Alpert.



Common House Centipede close-up. Photo: G. Alpert.



A two-foot wide vegetation free zone around buildings can reduce moisture problems. Photo: M. Frye

House centipedes may deposit up to 35 eggs in areas with high moisture content. This species of centipede can live for a year or more, while other species of centipede can live for several years. The amount of time required for eggs to hatch and nymphs to mature to adults varies with environmental conditions.

Management

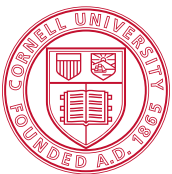
While house centipedes are predators that can help reduce other pest populations, their presence indicates a moisture problem. Thus, the key to managing house centipedes is eliminating moisture conditions that favor their development. These conditions are most often found in basements, crawl spaces, and associated with mulch in landscape plantings or other organic debris adjacent to the home. Increasing ventilation and placing a layer of thick plastic over exposed soil in basements and crawl spaces can help reduce moisture problems. Outdoors, a vegetation free zone of two feet around the building with no plants, mulch or organic debris (leaves, wood, compost) can be used to reduce moisture from the foundation and deter centipedes and other pests.

Cracks and crevices in the foundation or gaps around windows and doors are common entry points for centipedes and other pests. Because centipedes typically breed in moist areas outdoors, sealing openings on both the inside and outside is an important step to preventing pest entry. Sticky or glue traps can be used in basements and other areas to monitor for centipedes, and to determine if entry points have been successfully sealed.

Centipedes are occasionally carried directly into a facility with the delivery of potted plants, firewood or other materials. When the substrate dries out, centipedes leave in search of a more humid environment and for prey. In this case, it is important to screen and identify temporary sources of infestation to avoid unnecessary pest introductions.

In centipede management, the use of pesticides as either an outside perimeter treatment or as an interior treatment is not advised. Centipedes, like spiders, hold their bodies high while moving, and therefore have limited contact with pesticide-treated surfaces. Reducing moisture, sealing entry points and trapping centipedes on sticky traps represent the best course of action.

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