



Tony Glover  
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News Release

## Pill Bugs

Question: Can “Roly Polies” cause damage to plants? I have never seen as many as I have this fall in my flower beds.

Answer: “Roly polies” have a much more impressive scientific name that does not sound nearly as interesting - *Armadillidium vulgare*. They are a familiar inhabitant of mulched areas and flower beds. Like you, I have also always called them "roly-polies" because of their habit of rolling up into a tight ball when disturbed. Another common name is pillbugs because when they roll into a tight ball they look like a little gray pill. They were a great source of entertainment for kids before video games came along. Pillbugs are small, brownish to grey-black in color, and armored in appearance much like an armadillo (hence the scientific name “*Armadillidium*”). Which reminds me of a joke: Question: Why did the chicken cross the road? Answer: To show the armadillo it could be done. But I digress.

In most years pillbugs are content feeding harmlessly on decaying organic matter in and on the soil. They love the excess moisture we have had all fall which provides a perfect environment for reproduction. All the rain this summer and fall provided the perfect storm for pillbugs to become a pest of some landscape plants. Most feeding takes place in the evening or at night – the sneaky devils. Feeding pillbugs readily chew on small garden plants, and new transplants can be eaten to the ground overnight. Some of the plants attacked include hosta, pansies, blue lobelia, cardinal flower, English primrose, Allyssum, zinnia, verbena, and daisy. Garden vegetables and strawberries are also susceptible. During the day, pillbugs can be found in moist areas under mulch or leaves and vegetable debris of all kinds. Cooler portions of compost piles can also harbor large numbers of pillbugs. They are very prolific, giving birth to 30-80 young per brood. In Alabama pillbugs may produce two to three generations per year. Adult pillbugs are relatively long-lived, with some surviving several years.

The best way to eliminate pillbugs is to destroy their breeding and hiding sites. Do not apply mulch too thickly around plants. A two or three inch layer is adequate. Flower pots, planters, dog houses, firewood, bricks or other objects that sit directly on the ground should be elevated to allow air-flow and drying underneath. Adjust irrigation systems so that the soil around your

home has a chance to dry between watering or better yet cut the system off when not needed. When abundant, pillbugs may enter homes and become a nuisance. This can be prevented by careful sealing of doors and cracks in foundations. Pillbugs are harmless and can be removed by hand, or by vacuuming. They rarely survive more than one or two days indoors, due to lack of moisture. Kittens like to play with them but I doubt they offer much control.

Pesticide sprays are not normally needed but can be used if the problem becomes severe. For more information and a list of chemical control options visit: <http://citybugs.tamu.edu/FastSheets/Ent-1044.htm>

For more about this topic please contact Tony Glover, Regional Extension Agent-Home Horticulture, Home Gardens and Home Pest Management at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email [gloveta@aces.edu](mailto:gloveta@aces.edu).

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