Homes in a number of Alabama counties often experience millipede “invasions” in the early summer (Figure 1).

Homes that have had such an invasion are often 3 to 5 years old with well-kept lawns. In general, millipede incidents appear to decrease considerably without the aid of chemicals or other control measures after the home is about 7 years old.

What Are Millipedes?

Millipedes are not insects. Millipedes belong to the arthropod class Diplopoda which means “two footed” or “double footed.” The class name refers to the fact that most body segments support two pairs of legs.

Millipedes should not be confused with centipedes which bear only one pair of legs per body segment. There are about 1,000 different kinds of millipedes. The one that has been most troublesome to homeowners in Alabama is the common garden millipede.

The garden millipede is brown-black and about 1/2 to 3/4 inch long and 1/16 inch wide (Figure 2). Millipedes prefer to live in moist places, including under large rocks, beneath pine bark or straw mulch, in well-kept lawns, and under wood. They lay their eggs in the soil during the spring and summer and usually overwinter as adults. We do not know why millipedes migrate, but we believe it is in response to food and moisture.

Do Millipedes Bite Or Sting?

No, millipedes do not bite or sting. (Centipedes bite and inject venom from their jaws into their victims.) Millipedes give off an offensive odor when disturbed or crushed, and can stain fabrics.

How Can Millipedes Be Controlled?

The most effective method of millipede control is using an IPM approach. The least effective method of control is relying on chemicals alone. Reliance on chemicals alone results in very poor control.

As a homeowner, you may undertake your own IPM plan by implementing the control alternatives listed below, or you may elect to contract the services of a professional pest control operator. Professionals have the equipment and training to do a thorough job and have access to...
products not available to homeowners. If you decide to contract the services of a professional pest control operator, get estimates from several reputable firms before you decide on one.

Non-chemical management practices. Reducing the availability of moist resting places often provides faster and better control of these pests, than chemicals alone.

The hordes of millipedes at a mental health facility in Birmingham, Alabama, were halted when the following non-chemical measures were taken.

- Dethatch the lawn because millipedes thrive in the dense thatch layer of plant material just above the soil surface.
- Closely mow and edge the lawn so the lawn can dry more quickly and reduce the millipede habitat.
- Remove debris that can provide a hiding place for millipedes. Pull mulch away from the house because it retains moisture, creating a good hiding place for the millipedes.
- Water grass in the early morning so that it can dry during the day.

If millipedes enter your house, vacuum them up and discard them outside. Some species can stain carpeting or fabric, especially if crushed.

Chemical control. If you prefer to use chemicals as a method of control, take care to treat around the entire perimeter of the house in a 5- to 20-foot band. Apply a chemical, such as Baygon, Ficam, or Sevin (Pinto 1990), that will result in a quick kill because millipedes can move quickly across a treated surface. Wettable powders provide longer residual activity.

Also treat doorways and other openings to the house with a material labeled for this use.

Because millipedes are not insects, most insecticides alone are of little or no use. The non-chemical management practices outlined above should be implemented in conjunction with chemicals to enhance control.

References