INFORMATION SHEET
An Environmental Protection Team Service

Woodlice

Class *Crustacea, Order Isopoda*

Introduction

The class *Crustacea* is an enormous grouping of species of Arthropods, the vast majority of which are aquatic. Very few species have successfully colonised land, but the woodlice are undoubtedly the most well known. There are about 35 species of woodlice in Britain and some of these are of horticultural or agricultural significance, because they eat and damage plants. Some woodlice come indoors, especially during the cooler autumn and winter weather, and of these the commonest by far is the garden woodlouse.

Group Characteristics

The land-living *Crustacea* have a potential problem of body-water loss and as a result they favour localised habitats of very high humidity. Insects have a system of internal branched tubes carrying oxygen-rich air from the external openings, or spiracles but woodlice use a combination of skin surface and external gills for gaseous exchange. All species of woodlice live in damp areas and those species commonly found in the garden are usually associated with dead and rotting vegetation beneath stones, flower pots and other types of cover.

The sexually mature woodlice mate and the female commences to produce a variable number of eggs usually up to about 150. These are contained within her body, in a brood pouch, until the young have hatched when they are then released into the environment. The young first-stage woodlouse is white and up to about 2mm in length. A succession of skin moults allows the young woodlouse to grow, eventually also producing a 7^{th} pair of legs, (the first two stages only have 6 pairs of legs). It may take up to a year for the woodlouse to achieve full size but this is greatly dependent on food supply and temperature. However, woodlice become sexually mature from about half size onwards. In Britain, it is common for most species of woodlouse to produce only one generation per year.

Woodlice have several features which set them apart from other Arthropods. The most obvious is their body design of flattened overlapping plates and very distinctive large front antennae. The garden woodlouse is distinguished from other common species by the shape of its antennae after the sharp bend, (with two segments) and the head which has a distinct lobe on each side.

The species of woodlice which occasionally enter houses are entirely casual visitors, searching for some protection from the onset of cold weather and perhaps being encouraged by the build-up of vegetation outside of the house. They are capable of a small amount of chewing damage to plant leaves but are usually harmless. If disturbed, woodlice naturally curl up into a ball, and one species, known as the common pillbug *Armadillidium vulgare* (Latreille) is known particularly for this habit.

Control

Control of woodlice in a room may be achieved by cleaning (as they do not breed indoors).

Improved proofing by sealing potential entry points from outside should be attempted. To help prevent further invasion from the adjacent garden, rubbish and other potential refuges should be removed. An insecticidal barrier of a residual dust or spray may also help prevent further immigration into damp areas to discourage the presence of woodlice.

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