



Information

Bohart Museum of Entomology

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Sowbugs & Pillbugs

Both sowbugs and pillbugs are terrestrial members of the crustacean group Isopoda, more closely related to crabs and shrimp than to insects. Most isopods are aquatic or marine, and many are parasites of fish. Characteristically, isopods have seven pairs of legs and the body consists of a head, with antennae, and a series of armored body plates ending in a tail-like telson. They have one brood a year, which females carry in special ventral (back) brood pouches until the offspring are old enough to feed on their own. Isopod young closely resemble the adults.

Two types of terrestrial isopods are commonly observed in urban and suburban settings, pillbugs and sowbugs. Pillbugs, the common name for *Armadillidium vulgare*, can protect themselves by rolling up into a tight ball, when disturbed. Sowbugs, or species in the genus *Porcellio*, are oval and somewhat flattened. Sowbugs cannot roll up into a ball the way pillbugs do. Both kinds of isopods are gray to slate-colored, although

individuals who have recently shed their exoskeleton are often purple or blue.

These animals are common in damp areas in gardens, under stones and boards, under ivy, and along streams and in other wet areas. They are nocturnal and are most active during the rainy season, or in damp foggy conditions.

Sowbugs and pillbugs are major pests in gardens, nurseries and glasshouses along the Pacific coast and other areas of high rainfall or fog drip. They feed on decayed vegetable matter and tender young plant growth, attacking young plants of all kinds. They are common pests on strawberries, vegetables, forage crops and even mushrooms. *Armadillidium*, the pillbug, is actually an introduced pest species from Europe. Controlling these creatures is difficult and generally involves eliminating damp, dark places where they can shelter, and the use of pesticides.

