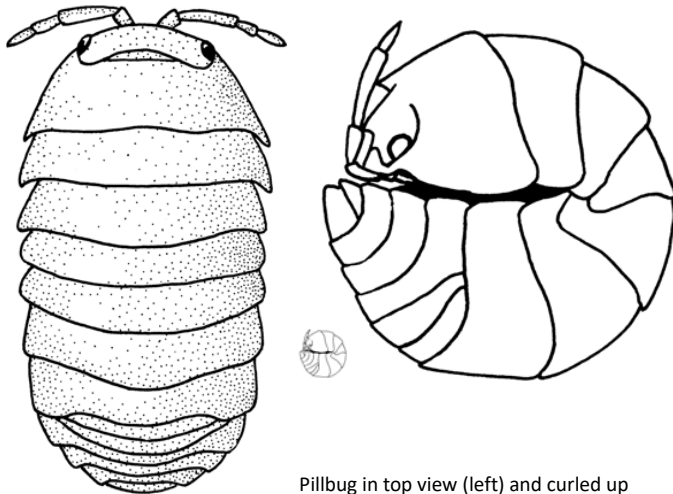


Sowbugs & Pillbugs



Pillbug in top view (left) and curled up (right), with life sized reduction (middle).

Both sowbugs and pillbugs are terrestrial members of the crustacean group Isopoda, and are 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 brood pouches until the young are old enough to feed on their own. Isopod young closely resemble the adults.

Two types of isopods are commonly seen in urban and suburban settings in California, sowbugs and pillbugs.



Sowbug, *Porcellio scaber*. Photo by Yug, Wikipedia.

Sowbugs, species in the genus *Porcellio*, are oval and somewhat flattened creatures. They cannot roll up into a ball, unlike pillbugs. Pillbugs, the common name for *Armadillidium vulgare*, can protect themselves by rolling up into a tight ball, when disturbed. Both kinds of isopods are grey to slate-colored, although purple or blue individuals can be found. These individuals are infected with a harmless virus.

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 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, including straw-berries, 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.



Virus infected pillbug. Photo by Cynthia Bingham Keiser.