

Repulsive but harmless centipedes

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La Presse

The situation is different in large centipedes, usually of tropical origin. Many have a certain charm, an interesting personality, although reserved. They are very popular as pets, but this is not really the case with millipedes, which measure two or three inches in length, and sometimes have the bad habit of wanting to spend the winter in our basements.

This small iulus is one of the myriapods most frequently encountered in our gardens. (Photo by Claude Gélinas.)

This connection between the multiple legged arthropod and mankind does not go smoothly. During the past year, many readers have written to express their exasperation toward millipedes. This is notably the case with Marie Rhaines of Saint-Basile-le-Grand on the South Shore, who is asking how to be rid of the bug. "Throughout the summer, we were faced with this small blackish and repulsive worm, which hung around our front door," she writes. "We tried everything to get rid of it: we removed the mulch, we used powder insecticide for crawling insects, we sprayed with a solution of bleach, etc. Nothing happened. They were always there in the evening. I await the spring season with apprehension."

Millipedes or centipedes are not precisely bugs, but they are part of the same group of arthropods and are usually associated with lobster, shrimp, crayfish and other crustaceans such as terrestrial woodlice, often called "moisture bugs". Almost all are of tropical origin and approximately 10,000 species exist worldwide, which represent only 20% of the family, explains Jean-Denis Brisson, taxonomist specializing in Entomology, Department of Natural Resources and Wildlife. In the province of Quebec, we count about thirty species, and half of them were imported from Europe since colonization. Curiously, even though they came to us since many, many moons ago, the European species are still located where they first landed originally.

Another species also exists in Quebec, the *Narceus americanus*, a nice bug that reaches fifteen centimeters in length, rather rare and found in the south-western region of the province of Quebec. Even if they are classified among the centipedes, our small iulus only have 40 to 60 legs, with two pairs of legs per segment. Like most members of the family, a pair of legs is added with each metamorphosis, about four to five per year, the animal being in hibernation during the winter season.

In the tropics, the bug is in continuous growth, which explains why it is the longest specimen, some up to 45 cm. Yet, despite the name, no centipede or millipede is equipped with 1000 legs, but almost. Our *Narceus americanus* has about 220 and its cousin, better equipped in this regard, has nearly 800 legs.

Myriapods have a naked body, but often dotted with scattered hairs, which does not make them really hairy bugs. Large specimens sometimes emit a foul odor when handled. This is not the case with our iulus. Centipedes eat mostly organic decomposed matter, but in greenhouses, some species can cause significant damage to the roots of young plants. Some species can also damage crops in Africa.

Over here, the bug is found in the compost pile and in plant detritus, in a wet environment essential for its survival. It does not bite, does not sting, and does not transmit disease. For its defense or if it is handled clumsily, it will wrap around itself. It spends the winter in

hibernation and can live about three years.

At the end of the season, small millipedes can sometimes migrate and seek to enter heated shelters such as garages or homes. In the United States, they are sometimes multitudes seeking refuge for the winter, but this is the exception and the phenomenon has never been seen in Quebec. Elsewhere, invasions by centipedes have occurred several times in the past, in such countries as Japan, Germany, France and Hungary, and to such an extent that the wheels of locomotives had no control on the rails!

In Quebec, millipedes who manage to get into a house will generally be in the basement because of humidity, but they inevitably die of dehydration. By way of prevention, the cracks in the foundation or the structure of the house must be sealed. Jean-Denis Brisson also recommends the installation of a strip covered with Tangle Foot, a highly sticky product, in places where the centipedes usually climb to enter the house. Obviously, the compost pile and accumulation of vegetal debris should be kept away from your residence.

If you insist on getting rid of those little innocent bugs, Micheline Lévesque, author of *The Complete Guide to Low-impact Pesticides*, recommends spreading diatomaceous earth on the ground, as the silica needles cause their death. After a rain, just take a rake to the whitish powder to regain its effectiveness. Sold everywhere, but at a much better price at pool equipment authorized dealers, diatomaceous earth is also very effective against slugs. Mrs. Lévesque also recommends an application inside the house, where millipedes are hiding. The product is also effective for the elimination of ants.

The expert also recommends a product called Orange aPEEL, a product made from the peel of oranges, sold in the natural products section. A natural substance, D-limonene, acts both as an insecticide and as a repellent. And it smells real nice, she says.