

Cutworms (larva of moths belonging to family Noctuidae)



Figure 1 Damage to plant and larva (black cutworm)



Figure 2 Adult (black cutworm)



Figure 3 Larva (dingy cutworm)

Cutworms are the larvae (caterpillars) of several species of night-flying moths in the family Noctuidae. Cutworms can be quite distinct from one another, and their coloring can vary from brown or tan to pink, green or gray and black. Much of the information below is about the Black Cutworm (*Agrotis ipsilon*).

Damage

Most cutworm damage occurs on vegetable seedlings early in the season when plants are small and have tender tissue. When soil is moist and plants are still small, cutworms emerge on the surface at night and attack the first plant they can reach, cutting off the stems. When the soil is dry, cutworms stay in the soil and gnaw on roots below the surface, causing plants to wilt. Some “climbing” cutworms climb the stem to eat the leaves of more mature plants.

When Are They Active

Black cutworms overwinter in the south and migrate, arrive in Wisconsin in the spring, and lay eggs in large clumps. Other species overwinter in Wisconsin as eggs or larvae. Although cutworms are active throughout the summer, they are rarely a problem after spring.

Susceptible Plants

Cutworms eat beans, asparagus, cabbage and related plants, beets, peas, celery, peppers, carrots, tomatoes and potatoes, leafy greens, onions, squash and other cucurbits, and especially corn.

Prevention Methods

Surrounding transplants with collars made of aluminum foil or cardboard can block access by cutworms, if the collar extends a few inches deep into the soil and rises a few inches above the soil surface. Remove weeds a few weeks before planting, and again in the late summer and early fall, to curb the larvae’s numbers. A number of parasitic wasps, flies and ground beetles help keep cutworm populations down. Birds feed on the larvae.

Treatment Methods

Spinosad or *Bacillus thuringiensis* can be effective organic pesticides for larger garden plants damaged by climbing cutworms.

Additional Information/Resources

- UW Extension Bulletin [A3821 Black Cutworm](#)
- University of Minnesota Extension [Cutworms in home gardens](#)
- Dane County UW Extension Horticulture Hotline [608-224-3721](#) (M-F, 9 am-12 noon, April 15 – October 31) or horticulture@countyofdane.com

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