



Practice Organic Cutworm Control to Protect Seedlings



Cutworms (*Agrotis ipsilon* and *Peridroma saucia*)

- first thing in the morning, find seedlings that have been cut off at the soil line during the night.
- Direct-seeded beans and corn are frequent victims, especially when planted into soil recently cleared of weeds and grasses. Young transplants are also frequent victims.
- Organic cutworm controls include protecting seedlings with rigid collars, encouraging predation by birds and thorough bed preparation.
- The two most common species, black cutworms (*Agrotis ipsilon*) and variegated cutworms (*Peridroma saucia*) are both found in temperate climates worldwide.

What Are Cutworms?

- Rarely seen by day, cutworms are grayish to brown smooth-skinned caterpillars that feed above-ground at night.
- The larvae of night-flying moths, cutworms damage plants by feeding on both roots and foliage.
- Black cutworms have small black dots on their bodies.
- Variegated cutworms are mottled brown with a faint white stripe down their backs.
- When encountered in the soil, cutworms immediately curl up and become still.

What Cutworm Damage Looks Like

- Cutworms girdle plants by wrapping themselves around tender stems as they chew.
- Cutworm damage usually takes place right at the soil line, with only a nub left at the surface, the top portion of the plant is left to shrivel unconsumed.
- rabbits chew off a sharp edge, often at an angle, and leave no leftovers. In summer, cutworms can crawl up plants and chew holes in the foliage that looks like damage done by slugs.

Cutworm Life Cycle

- Variegated cutworms overwinter as larvae, which move to the surface to feed in spring. These individuals are the cutworms most likely to decapitate early cabbage seedlings or lettuce sown while the weather is still cool.
- Black cutworms emerge as adults, and promptly begin laying eggs at the bases of weeds and other host plants such as lamb's-quarters and wild mustards. The eggs hatch in less than a week, and the

larvae feed on roots and foliage for about a month before they are ready to pupate into adults. By late spring, both types of cutworms are posed to be serious pests in young stands of beans or corn.

Natural Enemies of Cutworms

- The soft bodies of cutworms make them easy prey to ground beetles; nighttime predators including bats, toads and snakes; beneficial insects including tachinid flies, braconid wasps and yellow jackets and insect-eating birds that feed by scratching at the soil's surface

Organic Cutworm Control.

- Cutworm collars made from plastic drinking cups or cardboard tissue rolls help protect young seedlings from cutworm damage.
- Many gardeners also protect seedlings from cutworm damage by placing a nail, toothpick, or bamboo food skewer into the soil alongside the plant stem. Although labor-intensive, this method is practical in small plantings.
- Other gardeners make small moats around plants and fill them with cornmeal. Cutworms eat the cornmeal but cannot digest it, and many die.
- If you have already seen cutworm damage, handpick larvae at night by flashlight

More Advice on Organic Cutworm Control

- New garden areas previously occupied by grass or weeds should be cultivated in fall and again in spring to expose and kill overwintering cutworm larvae and pupae. Chickens let into the plot after these cultivations will help improve the effectiveness of this technique.
- Do not use plastic mulch in high-risk beds, because cutworms living beneath plastic mulch are impossible to control.
- If you want to passively trap the adult moths in your garden, use solar landscape lights set above broad pails of soapy water.