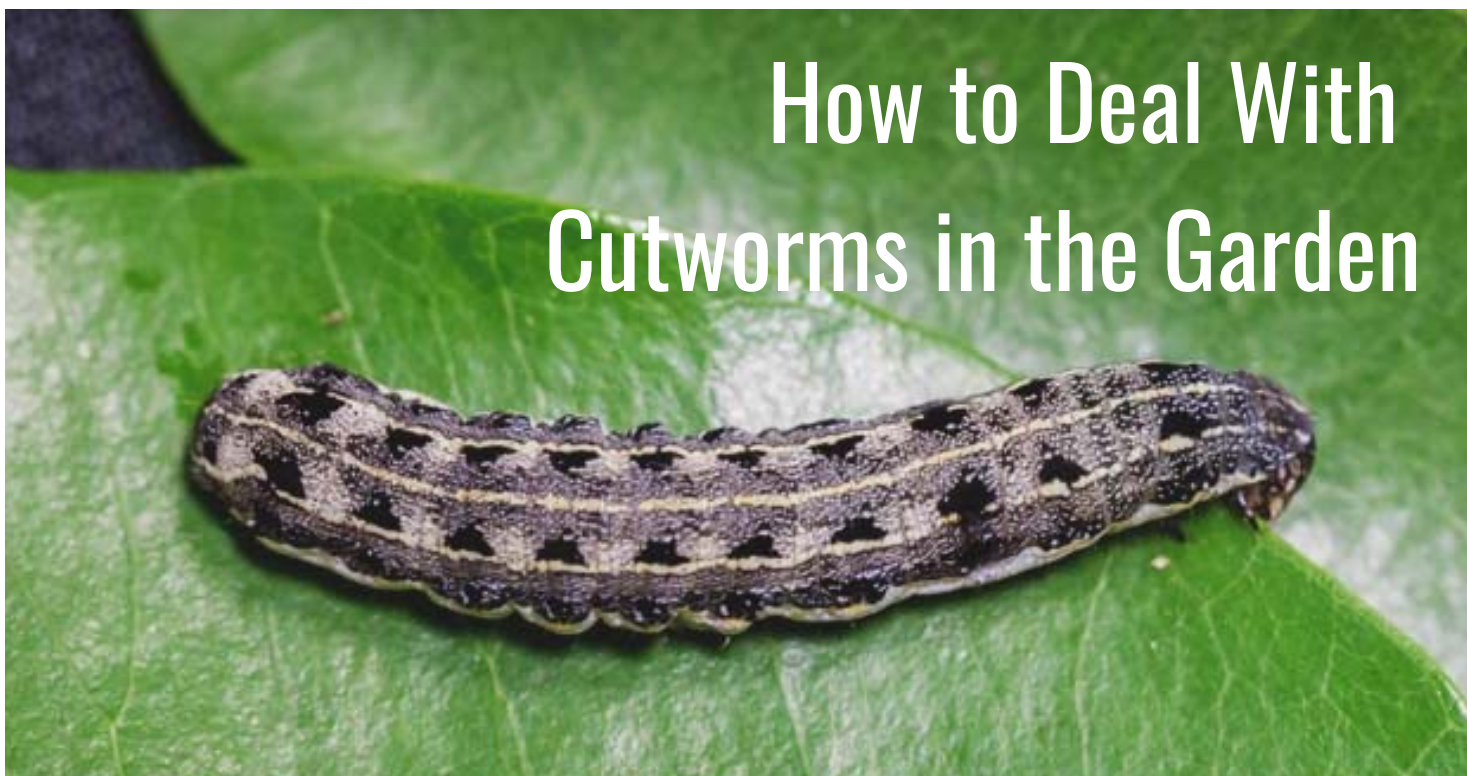


How to Deal with Cutworms in the

EDIBLE GARDEN



How to Deal With Cutworms in the Garden



If you've ever gone out to your edible garden in the spring or early summer and noticed that the stems of your new plants have been severed cleanly at the base and the cut part of the plant is laying on the soil surface, you may be seeing the work of an aptly-named pest: cutworms.

“Cutworm” is the generalized term for the larvae of several species of moths. The adults do not damage plants, but the caterpillars are extremely destructive. The adult moths can lay hundreds of eggs at a time and up to five generations of insects per year may be produced. The larvae can successfully overwinter, even in cold climates. Cutworms can chew off leaves, stems, and flower buds, and depending on their numbers, a massive amount of damage can be done to the edible garden in a single night as they feed. During the day, they hide out in the soil, usually sticking close to plants they have eaten. Sometimes if you lightly dig around in the soil, you'll stir one up – you'll know for sure it is a cutworm if it curls into a characteristic “C” shape. They are dull green, grey, or brown in colour and range from 30 millimetres (1.2 inches) to 38 millimetres (1.5 inches) in length, depending on species.



Preventing Cutworm Damage



Keep up with weeding in the garden! Cutworms are attracted to areas that they can hide in. Weeds provide habitat and places for the adult moths to lay their eggs.

Don't grow grass right up to the edge of your garden bed. Cutworms will take cover in the grass then crawl over to your vegetables for a midnight snack.

Although mulch is encouraged for use in the edible garden, if cutworms are an issue, don't give them another place to shelter in. Clean up any leaf litter and other plant debris, as well. Leave the soil around your plants bare.



How to Control Cutworms

It is inconvenient as it has to be done during the night, but hand-picking cutworms from your plants by the glow of a flashlight can be very effective, albeit disgusting. Drop them into a bucket of soapy water to get rid of them.

Make collars for your plants. Go through your recycling bins and find small yogurt containers or toilet paper rolls. Cut the bottoms out of containers and ring individual plants with the cones, sinking the cardboard rolls or plastic containers down to about 5 centimetres (2 inches) below the surface of the soil. Cutworms usually leave plants alone once they have grown beyond seedling size, so you can remove the collars in a few weeks. Toilet paper rolls may be composted, while you can reuse the plastic containers next year. Some gardeners closely position bamboo skewers or wooden popsicle sticks around the stems of their plants to keep the cutworms from curling around the stems and severing them.



If you find your garden is overrun with cutworms and you are on the verge of losing all of your young plants, you can purchase beneficial nematodes from the garden centre. These microscopic worms prey on cutworms and can quickly decimate the population in your garden. Be sure to purchase nematodes that will specifically feed on cutworms, as nematodes are particular about their food and will usually only eat certain types of pests. Ask the staff at the garden centre which types are best to use. Follow all of the package instructions to care for and release the nematodes.

Fortunately, cutworms usually do the most damage in early spring, so if you find yourself with some plant losses, you might just have enough time to purchase transplants or even sow new seeds.



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