

Benton County Master Gardener Problem Diagnosis Scenario #50
(Cutworm)

Problem “My corn plants and other vegetables are being eaten by something. Help!”
Description (June) Young shoots have been cut down, and older foliage appears to be dying.
Questions and Answers Question: Describe the foliage problem you are observing. Answer: In the mornings small plants are lying on the ground, cut off at the stem. Question: Describe the other symptoms you are observing. Answer: The shoots are coming up from the ground with chewed spots on them. Question: When did you first notice the problem? Answer: It started this spring, and now I'm afraid I could lose all my precious corn. Question: Have you seen any insects or worms in the garden during the day? Answer: No, I've seen nothing. I thought I had slugs, but there are no slime trails anywhere.
Reference(s) https://pnwhandbooks.org/insect/vegetable/vegetable-pests/common-vegetable/vegetable-crop-cutworm https://agsci.oregonstate.edu/oregon-vegetables/black-cutworm-variegated-cutworm http://oregonstate.edu/dept/nurspest/cutworms.htm
Diagnosis: Cutworms –The larvae of cutworm moths are active voracious feeders at night. Later larger stages of the larvae do the most damage- severing seedlings at or near soil surface. The larvae are most active and cause the most damage during spring and early summer months. Corn, tomatoes and green beans are favorites of cutworms. (The adults are night-flying moths.)
Recommendations Cultural control: Control weeds, grasses, & debris in the vegetable garden that provide cover. In the daytime cultivate the soil frequently to expose them for handpicking. Using a flashlight, handpick at night when cutworms are active. Fall tillage can help. Lambs quarters and wild mustard attract egg laying female moths & provide food for larvae- control them. Biological control: Several strains and products of <i>Bacillus thuringiensis</i> (Bt) are available. Early-season sampling, detection, and treatment when the larvae are small are critical steps for successful results with these products. Larvae half-grown or smaller are most susceptible. Bt is not effective on subterranean cutworms. Chemical control: Chemical treatments work best at early stages- at first signs of activity, but cutworms are difficult to control with chemicals. Where cutworms are on the soil surface, a carbaryl drench (when bees are not present) may help. Read and follow the directions on the label.

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