European Earwig

Figure 1. An adult male European earwig.

The **European earwig** (*Forficula auricularia*) is the only species of earwig found in Colorado and much of the northern US. A non-native insect that was accidentally introduced to North America, it is a common insect in gardens and greenhouses in many areas of Colorado, particularly along the Front Range and in high elevation communities.

In feeding habits European earwig is a true omnivore. It does feed on plant matter, particularly leaves and flowers, which sometimes produces significant damage in gardens. However, it will also feed on insects and may be very important as a predator of aphids, insect eggs, and small soft-bodied insects such as caterpillars. Regardless of what it feeds on, it is a night active insect, which hides in tight, dark, moist sites during the day.

Figure 2. European earwig hiding upon a hemp plant during the day.

European earwigs spend winter in the adult stage, hidden under plant debris, mulch or other sheltered sites on the ground. In late winter the female will produce her first clutch of eggs, which are laid in a cavity in the soil. The mother remains with the eggs until they hatch and will continue to guard them until they have molted again. These immature stages then disperse to feed and develop on their own. The female may then produce another clutch of eggs that will hatch in mid-late spring.

Immature stages generally resemble the adults, but are smaller, paler and have less developed cerci (pincers) on the hind end. They become full grown within a couple of months after eggs hatch, with rate of development mostly determined by temperature.

The prominent cerci of this insect often attract attention and concern, but they are not able to produce any noticeable pinch. (Earwigs do have jaws that can produce a slight pinching sensation.) The shape of these cerci can be used to differentiate sexes, with males having bowed cerci and females cerci that are straight.

European earwig does possess a pair of wings that are normally folded and covered by a pair of short wing covers. However, European earwig cannot fly.

Figures 3, 4. Leaf injuries produced by European earwig. These injuries are similar to those produced by some beetles (e.g., southern corn rootworm, flea beetles). Grasshoppers also can produce similar injury, but more often feed along the leaf edge.

On hemp, feeding by European earwig produces minor leaf injuries that would rarely attract attention. Significant infestations are unlikely in production fields, but populations may develop well in and around greenhouses where there are live plants and abundant areas of sheltering cover produced by pots, flats of plants, and other materials or debris on the soil surface.

Dermaptera: Forficulidae