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Wet Weather Could Mean Springtail Outbreaks

With all the rain and snow, we might see an outbreak of springtails in all areas. Large numbers of springtails usually occur together on water surfaces such as in puddles, ponds and swimming pools, especially the "water springtail", *Podura aquatica* (Linnaeus). When these springtails occur in large numbers and search for a new location, they can enter homes and invade kitchens and bathrooms. They tend to crawl up the sides of houses and enter them through gaps between bricks or around doors and windows. They usually die quickly after entering a home, due to low humidity and lack of food. However, springtails can live a longer time in indoor potted plants or in buildings with a high level of humidity.

Springtails are small, about 0.04 to 0.2 inches in length and they are wingless. They vary in color ranging from black to gray to white, yellow, lavender, red, green or gold, depending on species. Some springtails are even patterned and some are iridescent or metallic. Springtails get their common name from a forked structure called a furcula on the end of their abdomen, which allows them to catapult forward when they are disturbed. This allows them to be able to jump 3 to 4 inches in some cases. Springtails develop through incomplete metamorphosis, having an egg, nymph and adult stages. This means there is little difference in the appearance of the nymph and adult forms, except in size. They are able to have multiple generations a year.

Sometimes springtails are misidentified as fleas, since they can occur in homes and jump. However springtails are round and soft bodied, instead of dark brown and flattened like fleas. Springtails also have normal sized hind legs, whereas fleas have enlarged hind legs to allow them to jump.

Springtails feed bacteria, fungi, lichens, algae and decaying vegetation. Some species feed on carrion, and a few carnivorous species eat other springtails and small invertebrates. In addition, some species feed on plant roots or on tender young plants, occasionally damaging potted or greenhouse plants. However, they are harmless to man and animals.

Populations of springtails tend to rise and fall depending on temperature, moisture and food availability. They tend to flourish in shady areas, that are rich in decaying leaves and humus, but they can be found in urban lawns

Some Control Options:

To reduce the population of springtails outdoors, reduce watering turfgrass or irrigate no more than once a week. Be sure to water the soil deeply each time, about 1 inch penetration.

To reduce springtail invasions indoors, seal all cracks and crevices with caulk or expanding foam. Also check weather stripping around doors and windows and replace when needed. Also rake leaves and mulches 1 foot away from foundations, so springtail populations do not increase around structures.

Insecticides can be applied around the perimeter of the foundation, including areas around windows or doors, under siding and in openings in brick or wood walls. Insecticides containing such chemicals as permethrin, bifenthrin or cyfluthrin can be used.

If springtail infestations continue to occur indoors, it may be due to populations living in potted plants or moist areas in walls or storage areas. They will tend to infest areas that are moist and have fungal growth. This includes areas such as toilet bowl tanks, wet insulation, drains, moist basements and damp walls. To control indoor infestations, the damp, organic matter must be removed. Then the springtails can be vacuumed and insecticides can be applied as a spot treatment.

Photo of a springtail, Order Collembola. Photo by Dr. Bart Drees, Professor and Extension Entomologist, Texas A&M University.