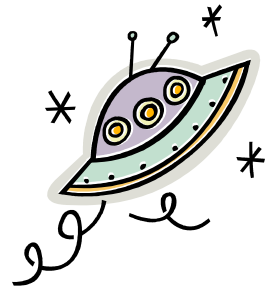


Leggy Beasts



What do you do when you come across a creature with more than 8 legs and is long and scary looking? Run? Call the authorities? Assume you have just seen a UFO occupant? Probably what you saw was a member of the order Chilopoda or Diplopoda! In layman's terms, either a centipede or millipede. These creatures are very important in the ecological scheme of things.

Centipedes got their name because the first scientists that studied them decided that, since they had so many legs, there must be about a hundred of them. Thus, the Latin "centi" meaning one hundred and "pede" for legs. Rather logical don't you think? Actually, the centipede has a lot less than 100 legs, and different species vary in this number.

Centipedes are actually beneficial critters in the garden. They feed on insects and should be encouraged to live in your garden by providing hiding places for them. Boards or rocks on the ground provide perfect "houses" for these animals. They catch their prey by injecting a poison into their blood stream. Interestingly, the poison is produced at the base of their first pair of legs, and these legs are modified into fangs. Most centipedes are harmless, but a few of the very large ones (up to ten inches in length) can inflict a very painful bite if they are mishandled. These large creatures are not found here, most of them are tropical.

The body of a centipede is flattened somewhat top to bottom, and the legs emanate from the sides of the body, one pair per body segment. Color varies from almost colorless and translucent to bodies marked in rainbow colors like greens, reds and blues.

Millipedes on the other hand are quite different from centipedes. Their bodies are a rounded, tube shape and their legs are situated on the underside of the body. They also have two pairs of legs per body segment, giving rise to their name, "milli" (one thousand) and "pede" (leg). This docile animal really doesn't have a thousand legs, but as you watch one move about, it appears like they do.

As opposed to the preying habits of centipedes, millipedes feed on decaying plant vegetation. They are a benefit in your compost heap and help to break down your compost into a usable form. These little helpers benefit from providing hiding places for them in your garden.

Millipedes have the habit of rolling up into a spiral when disturbed. It almost appears that they are trying to protect their legs by doing this. They are not harmful to humans, but do emit a substance that can irritate the skin of some people when they are handled. Simply wash your hands if you want to hold one of these little guys.

Centipedes and millipedes are good garden companions. So, when you see one of these multi-legged creatures, say hello. Unless, of course, it just stepped out of a UFO!