



# Homegrown Horticulture

TIPS FOR SUCCESS IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD

## Cutworms

There are a number of different types of cutworms that might cause damage in the garden. Unless you are really into knowing your problems intimately, you probably don't need to know a Red-backed cutworm from an Army or Variegated cutworm.

Cutworms are the larvae (caterpillars) of several species of moths. The adult moths aren't a concern for gardeners, but cutworms can damage a fairly wide range of different vegetable crops. Cutworms are solitary, night-time (nocturnal) feeders. The adults lay their eggs in weedy areas, and the cutworms hatch and emerge in spring when the soils start to warm up. Some species overwinter as the larvae. During the growing season, cutworms spend the daytime just under the soil surface, near plants. They are active at nighttime, feeding for several weeks at or near the base of plants. Most of the damage tends to be in the spring or early summer, mostly to seedlings.

Cutworms can be found by looking around the plants in the evening or by carefully digging about an inch (2.5cm) below the soil surface. Cutworms curl up in a characteristic C-shape when they are disturbed.

Seedlings or small plants may have their leaf stalks (petioles) cut or stems cut off near the soil surface, or the plants might seem to disappear overnight. There may be feeding damage on the stems, or occasionally on other parts of the leaves or fruit (depending on the species).

Cutworms can be controlled by chemical sprays, provided they are applied when they are active (at night). There are good biological products that are harmless to everything except the cutworms, but these must also contact the pests directly. Early and careful watching for the pests can help to get on top of a problem before it develops. Lost plants may need to be reseeded or replanted. Controlling weeds in or around the garden can help to reduce spaces where they can overwinter.

