

Big maggots in your compost?



Most people shudder when they see maggots in their bin composter or compost pile. Don't be grossed out – they won't hurt you. In fact, these larvae play a role in breaking down and recycling nutrients back into the soil. These maggots may actually be the larvae of compost-dwelling soldier flies.

This European insect seems to be found everywhere in North America where people reside. They are especially common where flies can get to a wet, rotting food source, garbage or other unsanitary conditions. Young soldier fly larvae are a gray-white color, segmented, about an inch in length and very active. As they mature they turn a dark brown color. Adult compost-dwelling soldier flies are black and about 5/8-inch long. They have smoky black wings. The adults will emerge, mate and die in two days. The adult flies are black and often are mistaken for black wasps. They do not bite or carry disease, as they have no hair on their legs.

Soldier fly larvae are voracious consumers of nitrogen-dominant decaying materials, such as kitchen food scraps and manures. Soldier flies don't usually invade houses, unless your compost pile is close to your house. They almost exclusively populate compost bins or sheet mulch compost piles and manure piles.

Soldier fly females lay eggs on the surface of nitrogen-rich material that is exposed. So, if you want to avoid having these large flies and their maggots in your compost pile, make sure you have enough leaves, dry grass, shredded paper and other organic "brown" material in the pile to cover the nitrogen food sources by at least two to four inches. Be sure to bury food scraps deeply in the pile and cover them well. You can further discourage these flies by putting window screen over any holes in the bin and gluing it down with a waterproof caulking (like an exterior household caulk) on the inside of the bin to help exclude the flies in their egg laying stage.

Birds love soldier fly larvae so you can remove them and feed them to chickens or just toss them on the ground and other birds may find them. They are actually very high in protein. The maggots are known to break down organic material in the pile so it can further decompose. And the flies inoculate the compost with beneficial bacteria from other sources.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact the Farm Advisor's office at cecalaveras.ucdavis.edu or 754-6477 with your agricultural questions.