

Cutworm Damage to Irises in the Early Spring

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article by Ted White)*

Many iris growers have cutworms in the irises in the very early spring and do not know it. The damage is often blamed on slugs that in the case are probably innocent. If you have seen large, irregular holes in a new flush of iris leaves, it is very likely that the culprit is a cutworm. While slugs can be a nuisance later in the season, they are much more likely to be found in and around hostas.



Cutworm damage to iris foliage by Robin Rosetta

Cutworms are common on a wide variety of vegetables and any fresh seedlings, but they also love tender iris foliage in the early season. To identify them, try patrolling your garden at dusk and evening hours, when cutworms will begin to feed. They are also partial to cloudy days. The cutworms often seen in Maine gardens exhibit a gray-tan color and often are about an inch long in early spring. As they chew away on your iris foliage, they will increase in size.

Adult cutworms are moths of dark wing colors. They are usually brown or gray, and they are about 1 ½ inches long with a 1 ½-inch wing length. You should keep an eye out for them, because the females will lay eggs in dry soil after they mate. These eggs can winter over, starting a new generation of caterpillars come spring.

Controlling cutworm damage may be accomplished by hand-picking the caterpillars at dusk and through the evening hours. A flashlight may come in handy. We find this the best method to rid them in your garden. During daylight hours, when you are tending your irises, look carefully at the soil when you see leaf damage. If a layer of leaves and other debris is present, remove it slowly and look for and remove the caterpillar.

Resist the urge to use harsh chemicals to battle cutworms. However, if the problem is severe, you may need to spray with Bayer Advanced Complete Insect Killer. It comes ready to spray from hose end sprayers. It is unlikely that you will need this product, and it is recommended that it be used only as a control of last resort. Handpicking caterpillars should be your first line of defense. Keep the garden free of chemicals whenever possible. Keeping your garden free from debris will also be a tremendous help.