

Corn Earworm

Biology:

This insect is one of the many moths that have very damaging larvae. It has been termed the most damaging corn insect in the world. In Wisconsin, most earworms are migratory, although pupae can survive in the soil in some conditions. A female moth will lay between 500 and 2,000 eggs, singly. The larvae hatch in about a week, feeding either on leaves or burrowing directly into the silk, first feeding on the silk and then feeding on tip kernels. They will feed on many types of plants, but are most damaging on corn and tomato. They may not spend their entire lives in a single ear, as they are mobile. They are also cannibalistic, so you will rarely find two larvae in the same ear. When mature, the larvae drop or crawl to the ground and pupate in the soil.

When to watch for them:

In early-planted sweet corn, corn earworm is rarely a problem because the migratory moths get here too late to lay eggs on early corn while it is still silking. Most earworm damage occurs during August and September, mostly on later corn. The larvae can have a wide range of color, from green to nearly black. A distinguishing feature is usually a light central stripe and a darker stripe on each side.

How to control them:

The best control measure in our area is to plant early-maturing sweet corn varieties as early as possible. This will usually keep the moths from laying eggs, at least in heavy numbers, on these corn plants because silking is over, or nearly so, by the time they arrive in our area. Control of this insect is difficult via other means. Once the larvae get into the ear, it is very difficult to kill them. In the future, Bt sweet corn hybrids may be available that naturally produce the Bt toxin that will prevent earworm and other caterpillar damage.

Commercially, use of insecticides for control of this insect is necessary in most areas. There are a few insecticides available that give sufficient control of this insect, but only when applied multiple times, beginning as soon as silks appear. Some of these insecticides include: Asana, Warrior, Lannate, and Ambush or Pounce. Be very certain to follow all label instructions and/or consult UW-Extension publication A3422 before using insecticides.