

# Common soil pests

*It is difficult to identify soil pests from their damage and, to determine the cause, it is usually worth spending time searching for them in the soil. However, by the time damage is apparent (e.g. seedlings wilting) the pest may have moved on. The larger pests can kill seedlings by chewing through the tap root or stem. Smaller ones tend to slow plant growth by nibbling at fibrous roots.*



**Leatherjackets** are the larvae of crane flies (daddy long legs). They can grow to 40mm long and be identified by the leathery grey appearance and the lack of any distinctive features – they have no legs nor an obvious head section. They can be particularly numerous after grass.

**Wireworms** are the light brown larvae of click beetles. Though most likely to be a nuisance after long-term grass or set-aside, in which they can complete their four-year life cycle, they are occasionally numerous in common crop rotations, such as those including cereals.



**Millipedes.** The most important pest species is the spotted snake millipede. It is creamy yellow, with a row of reddish spots along each side. It can be up to 20 mm long and have as many as 60 segments, most with two pairs of legs.



**Slugs** feed below and above ground. They feed with a rasping motion and holes created in tap roots by their feeding may be quite shallow in comparison to their area. Slugs are most common on heavy land, and most active in damp weather. They also feed on the leaves.



Being just 2 mm long, **pygmy beetles** make smaller holes in roots than larger soil pests. They also feed on leaves in which they make holes and notches. Of major crops, the only one on which it feeds is sugar beet and so crop rotation is usually an effective method of control



**Springtails** of *Onychiurus* species are small and white. Adults are about the same size as a pygmy beetle. They nibble the fibrous roots more than the tap root and, as a component of the 'soil pest complex', they can be partly responsible for slowing down seedling growth.



**Symphylids** resemble small white centipedes. They are common in some soils (Fens, Yorkshire Wolds) and can set back seedling growth by feeding on the fibrous roots. They are able to move well down into the soil and so may be difficult to find near the soil surface.

