

Granite State Home and Garden
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Springtails in New Hampshire

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Have you ever walked into your bathroom early one morning and looked into the tub to see hundreds of tiny insects hopping around the drain? Perhaps you've seen them in the spring in your damp basement hopping around on the window sill, or in the winter clustering by the thousands on top of the snow? At the New Hampshire Department of Agriculture, Markets & Food, we can expect numerous calls from those unaccustomed to the insects' presence on snow. According to information printed in *Borrer and Delong's Introduction to the Study of Insects* by Borrer, Triplehorn and Johnson, "springtail populations are often very large, up to 100,000/m³ of surface soil, or literally millions per hectare." Even those who are familiar with their arrival often remark that this year's populations far exceed that of any they may have witnessed in the past.

Springtails, or Collembola, are tiny, wingless, insects ranging from less than 1 mm to 10 mm long and can sometimes alarm homeowners in the spring or early summer when they appear in large numbers in moist or damp areas such as kitchen sinks, bathtubs, leaking pipes, basements, and in the soil of houseplants. Springtails are so named because they have a unique forked structure under their abdomen that acts as a spring-like lever to propel them into the air. Because of this jumping ability, springtails have also been called garden fleas, snow fleas, or water fleas, but these aren't true fleas at all. They will not bother you or your dog or cat.

Springtails are found in damp, humid environments such as in soil, leaf litter, decaying wood, fungi, mosses, along shorelines, ponds, puddles, pools, in greenhouses, cellars, and even on rocks and snow in the winter. Most feed on algae, fungi, and decaying vegetable matter, breaking it down and releasing nutrients back into their environment. That makes them a key component of many ecosystems. Occasionally, they can become pests in maple syrup production here in New Hampshire as they enter the sap buckets to eat the tree sap.

Springtails are very sensitive to low moisture levels and will die rather quickly if kept in conditions that are dry. Unfortunately, when their usual habitat begins to dry out, springtails sometimes invade our homes in search of more humid conditions, such as can be found in damp basements, bathrooms, kitchens, around drains or sinks, leaking water pipes, and in the wet soil of houseplants. Moldy furniture is said to be able to support large infestations. Springtails will die shortly after entering a home unless they find a moist area.

Springtails are present all around our houses, so as with most pests, the key to living with them is discouraging them from entering our homes in first place. Springtails have to have moisture to survive, so fixing leaky pipes, eliminating excess water in drains and in the soil of houseplants, and using fans or dehumidifiers to dry damp areas such as basements will make the home less attractive to these insects. They are also attracted to light and are small enough to fit through screens and tiny gaps around pipes, doors, and windows. Seal the gaps with caulk, weather stripping, or expandable foam where possible, and turn off unnecessary lights. Any springtails that get into the home can be vacuumed.

Outside of the house, eliminate moist areas such as excessive mulch, moist leaves, wet wood, and ground cover around the foundation to encourage air circulation. Insecticide sprays are not necessary for managing springtails and usually not recommended.

Most folks probably assume that with the mantle of snow covering most of New Hampshire, insects aren't present at this time of year. The snow fleas carpet the snow on warm winter days and remind us that spring will come, eventually. And with record snow fall in New England this winter, that's a comforting thought to many of us.

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