

Curious about caterpillars?



Caterpillars are the immature stages of butterflies and moths in the insect Order: Lepidoptera. Australia has over 10,000 moth and butterfly species, many of which are very beautiful yet oddly important to sustain plant life and our survival.

Why? – They are important pollinators of flowers, recyclers of nutrients, composters of leaves and plant matter in the environment. They are also important food – as an egg, a clambering caterpillar or as an adult, for a host of vertebrates and invertebrate animals.

A few caterpillars however are pests which can devastate crops and vegetables or your favourite garden plant. Are you curious about caterpillars in your garden?

Did you know?

- The caterpillar life-stage can be the longest stage of a moth or butterfly's lifecycle. Some caterpillars can eat their way through masses of plant material for several months before pupating, and then take months or even years before turning into a moth or butterfly.
- Some caterpillars are hairy which can cause itchy, allergic reactions. So always use a leaf to pick up your caterpillar.
- In large numbers some garden caterpillars can defoliate plants very quickly before moving onto their next host plant.
- Caterpillar numbers are controlled by many predators including parasitic wasps and flies – so if you watch a caterpillar pupate you might get a surprise when it pops out!

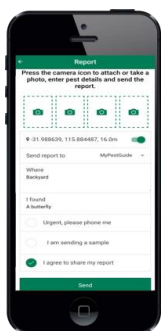


Activity goal

The goal of this activity is to **look** for, **photograph** and **report** any damage observed on plants in your garden, nature reserve, or urban park from curious caterpillars.

Materials required

1. A mobile device (phone or tablet) with [MyPestGuide™ Reporter](#) downloaded onto it.
2. A macro lens for your camera would be ideal, but not essential
3. [Instructions](#) on how to make a report.



What to do

1. **Find a plant with damage** Hint: look for holes and leaves with chew marks taken out of the edge.
2. **Survey the plant** – Look carefully at the leaves, along each stem and in the soil around the base of the plant. Can you see any caterpillars hiding?
3. **Survey the plant at night** – Using a torch, look carefully at the leaves, along each stem and in the soil at the base of the plant. Do you see a caterpillar?
4. **Report** what you find using [MyPestGuide™ Reporter](#).
5. **Take clear photos** of the plant, the caterpillar on the plant, the side of the caterpillar, and a close up the caterpillar's head as shown below.



6. **ID the host plant** (if you can) – Many caterpillars are quite fussy about what they eat, so if you can also identify the plant please record it in the app, in the any text box. If you don't know what kind of plant it is, no worries. We have botanists to help identify the plants too!

Protect your garden

- Look out for fall armyworm (*Spodoptera frugiperda*) (FAW), a plant pest that can damage a wide variety of crops. In particular:
 - maize,
 - sorghum,
 - forage grasses,
 - turf grasses,
 - cereals, and
 - rice.
- The pest can also feed on non-grass crops such as cotton, peanuts, vegetables and some fruit crops.
- FAW is able to disperse and migrate long distances, which enables it to exploit new habitats and expand its range.
- Protect your garden and be on the look-out for FAW this season.



More information

1. Cutworm: pests of crops and pastures

<https://www.agric.wa.gov.au/pest-insects/cutworm-pests-crops-and-pastures#:~:text=Cutworms%20are%20plump%2C%20smooth%20caterpillars,they%20pupate%20in%20the%20soil>

2. Fall Armyworm in Western Australia

<https://www.agric.wa.gov.au/plant-biosecurity/fall-armyworm-western-australia>

Acknowledgements

Photos of caterpillars kindly provided by Andras Szito, Pia Scanlon, (DPIRD), and from fantastic MyPestGuide Reporters.

Important disclaimer

The Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development and the State of Western Australia accept no liability whatsoever by reason of negligence or otherwise arising from the use or release of this information or any part of it.

Copyright © Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, 2020