

Common Asparagus Beetle

The common asparagus beetle, *Crioceris asparagi*, is a major pest of garden asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*) throughout the United States.

Identification and Biology

The adult beetle is ¼-inch (6.3 mm) in length. The elongated body is metallic blue-black with red margins and six cream-colored markings (Figure 1). Beetles emerge from the soil in early spring and fly to new shoots (Figure 2) to feed and mate (Figure 3).



Figure 1. Common asparagus beetle adult.



Figure 3. Adult beetles mating.

Each female lays up to 30 dark-brown eggs, placing them on end so they protrude from spear tips (Figure 4). Eggs are also deposited on ferns and flower heads.



Figure 4. Rows of eggs appear mid spring on spear tips.



Figure 2. Asparagus shoots emerging from the soil.

Larvae hatch in about a week and move to ferns where they begin feeding. Wrinkled, slug-like larvae are ⅓-inch (8.4 mm) long and olive-green to gray with black heads and legs (Figures 5-6).



Figure 5. Larvae consume tender ferns.



Figure 6. Feeding may defoliate asparagus plants.

Active mainly in the afternoon, larvae feed for about two weeks before dropping to the ground and burrowing into the soil to form yellow pupae. Within a couple of weeks, adults emerge and start feeding. Beetles overwinter beneath plant debris, loose bark, or hollow stems of old asparagus plants, completing their life cycle in eight weeks. There are two generations per year in Kansas and up to three in other parts of the United States.

Damage

Adults and larvae feed on growing asparagus spears (Figure 7) and may defoliate ferns. Larvae exude a black fluid that stains plants (Figure 8). Asparagus is still edible, but aesthetic damage may reduce market value. Larvae consume leaves and tender buds near the tips, leaving scars that eventually turn brown. Injury interferes with the plant's ability to photosynthesize, which depletes food reserves for next season's crop.

Management

To alleviate problems without insecticides, hand-pick eggs, adults, and larvae and place them into a container of soapy water. Eliminate plant debris after the growing season to reduce overwintering sites for adults.

When appropriate, apply insecticides such as malathion, carbaryl (Sevin), permethrin, insecticidal soap (potassium salts of fatty acids), rotenone, and horticultural oil (petroleum, paraffinic, mineral, and/or neem-based) early to protect plants from adults and larvae. Proper timing and thorough coverage are important to suppress populations. Apply insecticides late summer through early fall to prevent adult beetles from overwintering.



Figure 7. Feeding damage may cause spears to bend.



Figure 8. Larvae emit a black fluid that does not harm plants.

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