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The battle.

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[1]

You plant. You water. You nurture. And when you're about to harvest, you find that the lovely lettuce you were craving for lunch is riddled with holes--eaten by a freeloader.

It's aggravating. It's irritating. If you garden with kids, factor in their disappointment, and truly?it's downright criminal.

So, what can you do to ensure that you reap the rewards of your gardening efforts?

The key to a successful, healthy garden is...

...vigilance.

Honestly, gardening is not for the faint of heart. You need to get down on your knees, turn over leaves, and look for the little nasties that can decimate your crops. A quick perusal of the garden isn't good enough?pests camouflage well for a reason, hoping they'll find a lazy gardener so they can feast to their hearts' content.

Trust me. I know.

Since most gardeners focus on summer crops, there seems to be better awareness of the interlopers that snack on tomatoes, squash, and corn. But with the increasing number of us who are trying our hands at fall and winter gardens, we need to know what foes we face in our battle for food.

(Dramatic pause.)

To help you identify what might be munching on your crops, I'm shamelessly borrowing a few images from the Clemson Extension website, with credit cited for the terrific photos. When you have a few free moments, which I know seems like an oxymoron, please take a look at the fantastic information on the Clemson site. http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic [2] (I'm a Master Gardener, and I visit it several times a month?it's a wonderful resource.)

For most of these pests, it's best to hand-pick them from the plants. (Truly, my 9-year-old daughter loves this task.)

Then, it's time to decimate them.

The means of their demise depends on your sensitivity and squeamishness. Poison? Not an option. Not only are you likely killing innocent beneficial insects, but you want to eat the lettuce, not glow from it. Squishing is quick and effective?but it's high on my ?ick? factor. I typically drown pests in a bucket of soapy water. My daughter likes to throw them in the river behind our house to see what fish will eat them. Of course, for a serious infestation, there are plenty of organic pest controls on the market. Neem oil and insecticidal soap are good options?but read the labels carefully. I leave the decision to you.

Remember?not only are these pests masters of disguise...many are also tiny. Look carefully, and look often at your plants.

Without further ado, here are the villains of the fall/winter garden:

Cabbage Looper

[3]

David Cappaert, Michigan State University, www.insectimages.org [4]

Look for pin-head sized eggs on the underside of leaves. When the larvae hatch, they are almost translucent but quickly become green as they grow, with white lengthwise stripes. The young larvae begin eating on the underside of the leaves. As they grow, they will move to the center of the leaves, eating between the veins. At maturity, they will be approximately 1-1/2 inches, and they move much like an inch worm.

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Cabbage Webworm
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[5]

Alton N. Sparks, Jr., University of Georgia, www.insectimages.org [4]

Look for eggs on the underside of leaves in the angle along the leaf stems.

Larval webworms are about ½ inch long when mature. They're grayish yellow and marked with five brownish-purple lengthwise stripes. Their heads are black and bear a V-shaped mark.

When they first hatch, larvae feed on either side of the partly folded leaves of the plant buds. After a few days, they begin to feed beneath a protective web made from silk-like threads that they form. Sometimes the larvae are found on the outer leaves or in the angle between the main plant stalk and the leaf. They can be detected by debris and webs at the point of feeding.

Cabbage webworms tunnel into and kill the buds of young plants.

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Cross-Striped Cabbage Worm

[6]

Clemson University USDA Cooperative Extension Slide Series, www.insectimages.org [4]

Look for light yellow, semi-transparent eggs in clusters of 20 to 30 on the undersides of leaves.

When first hatched, the larvae are gray. At maturity, they are about 3/5 inch long and have numerous horizontal black stripes across bluish-gray backs. Along each side of the back is a longitudinal black stripe and below that, a bright yellow stripe. The underside of the body is light green, mottled with yellow.

Cross-striped cabbageworms prefer the tender terminal buds and the heads of cole crop plants. Look for plants riddled with holes.
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Diamondback Moth Caterpillars

[7]

Russ Ottens, University of Georgia, www.insectimages.org [4]

Look for single eggs or groups of two or three on the leaves. Eggs are small, nearly round and yellowish white.

The larvae are light green and pointed at each end, with tiny black hairs covering their bodies. They are about 1/3 inch long when mature and wiggle rapidly when disturbed, often dropping from the plant and hanging by silk-like threads. The larvae feed on all parts of the plant but prefer areas near the bud of a young plant, crevices between loose leaves of a firm head, and the undersides of wrapper leaves. Their feeding may disfigure the bud of a young plant.

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Imported Cabbageworm

[8]

Merle Shepard, Gerald R. Carner, and P.A.C. Ooi, Insects and their Natural Enemies Associated with Vegetables and Soybean in Southeast Asia, www.insectimages.org [4]

[9]

Look for single eggs on either side of the leaves. Eggs are yellow, oblong, bluntly pointed at the ends, deeply ridged lengthwise, and attached to the leaf by one end.

Larvae are velvety green with a narrow orange stripe down the middle of the back and a yellowish stripe along each side of the body. When mature, larvae are about 1¼ inches long. Larvae are sluggish when disturbed.

Imported cabbageworms feed near the center of plants and do more damage to the cabbage head. They chew through leaves indiscriminately.

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Aphids

[9]

Whitney Cranshaw, Colorado State University, www.insectimages.org [4]

Plants in all stages of growth can be covered with dense clusters of whitish-green aphids (plant lice.) Each aphid is the size of a pinhead. Aphids suck plant sap from the leaf, causing the leaves to curl and crinkle or form cups, completely lined with the aphids. In severe infestations, the plants wilt and die. The plants, if not killed, are dwarfed, grow slowly and form small, light heads.

To control aphids organically, spray Neem oil or insecticidal soap on the leaves. Make certain to coat both sides of the leaves, as well as spray in between any curled leaves.
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There you have it, my gardening friends, the ?Wanted? posters for our kitchen garden enemies. I hope you win your battle against these foes and taste sweet victory in your lettuce, cabbage, and broccoli.

To the victor goes the spoils! Enjoy!

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