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Springtails: Big Surprises in Small Packages

Springtails, those tiny, leaping insects of the damp basement, can be found year-round, if conditions for their existence are present. Springtails feed on algae, fungi, and decaying vegetable matter and are abundant only in damp, moist or very humid locations. Indoors, this might include kitchens, bathrooms, moist basements, soil of potted plants, and around window frames. Outdoors, springtails are one of the most valuable ~recyclers~ in the soil ecosystem. They break down organic matter so the nutrients can be reused by growing plants.

Springtails are about 1/16th of an inch long and vary in color from nearly transparent, to white to dark gray. They are wingless, and move by crawling or jumping. The jumping motion for which they are known is made possible by a forked tail attached to the underside of the abdomen and bent forward under the body. When this spring is released, the motion propels the insect upward and forward for a distance several times the insect's tiny length.

Springtails are harmless. They do not damage anything within houses or buildings, but are annoying because of their presence. Springtail activity in food warehouses or commercial kitchens may be reason for action by a health inspector. Springtails often become abundant in overwatered, potted houseplants, though they do no harm to established plants. Since springtails are generally restricted to moist or humid habitats, eliminating moist places of concealment by lowering the humidity or removing excess moisture will be the best means of control. The actual procedure to accomplish this will depend on the situation, although fans or dehumidifiers are one idea. Both contact and residual insecticide sprays can be used to control springtails, though insecticide application alone will not provide elimination in most situations.

[drawing from PCT Technician's Handbook, 2nd ed.]

