



# Identifying Common Sweet Corn Caterpillars

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Corn earworm, Fall armyworm, and European corn borer caterpillars can all infest the ears of sweet corn. **The most reliable way to identify them is to examine the heads of the caterpillars.**

Corn earworm caterpillars have a uniform light yellow-brown head. Fall armyworm caterpillars have distinctively marked heads—when viewed from the front, there is an upside down white Y which divides the head into three regions. The low (middle) region is light; and the left and right regions are dark. This is visible even on very small caterpillars. European corn borer caterpillars have dark brown heads, with no visible white Y.



Left - Corn earworm caterpillar  
Right - Fall armyworm caterpillar

## European Corn Borer

**Head capsule:** Dark brown.

**Body:** Light colored, often tinted pink, tan or gray, with a pattern of small darker spots on each segment. Fully grown larvae are ¾ to 1 inch long. They can be in the whorl, in or on the tassel, in stalks, or in the ears.



European corn borer

## Corn Earworm

**Head capsule:** Light yellowish brown.

**Body:** May be green, yellow, tan, brown, orange or pink with light and dark longitudinal stripes. Small bumps and hairs covering the surface may give the body a rough texture. Fully grown larvae are 1 ½ to 2 inches long. They can be found inside the ears or in the silk channel. This insect does not feed on the leaves.



Corn earworm

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## *Did You Know?*

Three species are common in our sweet corn: European corn borer, fall armyworm, and corn earworm.

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### Fall Armyworm

**Head capsule:** Dark with a prominent, light colored area shaped as an inverted Y.

**Body:** Tan, green or almost black and smoother than corn earworm. Light and dark stripes run the length of the body. Four small black spots are visible on most segments. On the last posterior segment, the four spots form a conspicuous square pattern. Fully grown larvae are about 1 ½ inches long. This insect does extensive feeding on leaves, stalks, silks, tassels, husks and/or ears, if they are young and tender. It leaves many large, messy droppings.



Fall armyworm

There are other caterpillars (or caterpillar-look-alikes) that you might find in ears of corn in New Hampshire. **Western bean cutworm** is an insect that has spread to New England. They are not very common. The larvae feed on leaves, tassel, pollen, silk, and kernels. You might find more than one in one ear. They have two broad brown stripes on the dorsal part of the pronotum... the segment just behind the head. Body color is variable, but usually brown or tan.



Western bean cutworm

**Sap beetle larvae** are sometimes mistaken for small corn borers. They are very small (up to 12mm [almost ½ inch]) cream or light tan larvae with brown heads. They have a brown, rear body section with two or four protruding points. They have only six legs, while caterpillars have six true legs on the thoracic section of the body, and many pairs of fleshy legs (“prolegs”) on the abdomen. Sap beetle larvae are most common when there have been good conditions for yeast to be introduced and grow inside the husks. Sometimes other insects attacking the ear will create those conditions.



**Sap beetle larva**

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*Photo credits: Clemson State University: corn borer larva.*

*Richard Clark, III: corn earworms.*

*Alan T. Eaton: fall armyworm, head capsules and sap beetle larva.*

*Frank Peairs, Colorado State University, took the photo of the western bean cutworm caterpillar, which we accessed through [www.bugwood.org](http://www.bugwood.org).*

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