June brings with it those wonderful afternoon thunderstorms that our lawns love. But it also is the time for mole crickets, which love our lawns, to begin hatching.

Mole crickets tunnel through the ground, destroying the turf. Hitchhiking on ships from South America around 1900, mole crickets arrived in Georgia and quickly established themselves throughout the Southeast.

Adults are about 1½ inches long and are light brown. Short forelegs allow them to easily tunnel through the soil in search of food and water.

Mole crickets became quickly established in Florida because they have no natural parasite to limit their development. Their favorite host is Bahia grass, which is widespread in the state, and the sandy soils are easy to tunnel through.

Tunneling loosens the soil, causing destruction of the root system. St. Augustine grass, which can also be damaged by mole crickets, is not as susceptible to damage because of its dense growth and coarse root system.

The insects feed at night during warm weather and usually after a rain shower or watering. They come to the surface of the soil to feed and eat organic material and small organisms or insects. After feeding, they return to their burrows.

The peak egg-hatching season normally occurs in the first part of June in Central Florida.

If you haven't seen them yet and want to make sure they are not living in your lawn, you can use the soap-flush method. Mix 1½ ounces of liquid soap in two gallons of water. With a sprinkling can, apply the soap mixture to four square feet of lawn in several locations. If two to four mole crickets appear on the surface within three minutes, control measures are needed. One mole cricket can do a lot of damage.

Mole crickets have numerous predators. Fire ants, ground beetles, earwigs and spiders are considered enemies. Larger animals, including raccoons, skunks, foxes and armadillos, will feed on them. However, these animals may also damage lawns in search of the mole crickets. Mole crickets are also cannibalistic and reduce their own populations.

Keeping a healthy lawn will control mole crickets. A deep, healthy root system is more tolerant to soil-inhabiting insects. Proper mowing, irrigation and fertilization are important. Do not mow Bahia and St. Augustine lawns shorter than three to four inches, and water only when needed. Fertilize according to the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agriculture Services recommendations. These practices will encourage deep-root growth.

If mole crickets cause damage, chemicals will most likely be needed. Chemicals should be applied during early to mid-June, a time when the crickets are in their early stages of development. Chemicals come in sprays, granules or baits. Read the manufacturer's label carefully before use. For more information on mole crickets, call Osceola County Master Gardeners, Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm, at 321-697-3000.

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