MOLE CRICKETS

The early summer months bring with them those wonderful afternoon thunderstorms that our lawns love. But it also is the time for mole crickets, which love our lawns, to begin hatching from eggs causing destruction.

Hitchhiking on ships from South America around 1900, mole crickets arrived in Georgia and quickly established themselves throughout the Southeast. They migrated to Florida and quickly flourished because they had no natural parasite to limit their development. The sandy Florida soils are also easy for the mole crickets to tunnel through while they feed on their favorite host plant, Bahiagrass, found throughout the state. St. Augustinegrass, which can also be damaged by mole crickets, is not as susceptible to damage because of its dense growth and coarse root system.

Mole cricket 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. In central Florida, the young mole cricket nymphs hatch from eggs in June and emerge as adults in August and September. Nymphs resemble the adults, but their wings are not completely developed.

These insects damage plants by feeding at night aboveground on the foliage and belowground on roots and tubers. The tunneling of the mole crickets near the soil surface also damages plants by dislodging the roots, causing them to dry out. Tunneling reduces the aesthetic quality of turf, interferes with the roll of the ball on golf courses, and results in reduced livestock grazing on severely infested pastures.

Mole crickets normally feed at night during warm weather and usually after a rain shower or watering. They may emerge, coming to the surface of the soil to feed eating the turf and other organic material. After feeding, they return to their burrows.

Mole cricket infestations can be detected by the appearance of small mounds of soil pushed up to the surface. Tunnels can also be a sign of mole cricket damage. Tunneling is most obvious in low-cut grass. They are most visible in early morning, when the dew is on the grass and the soil may be moist.

If mounds of soil and tunnels are not noticeable, you can make sure they are not living in your lawn by using the soap-flush method. To do this, 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. Just one mole cricket can do a lot of damage.

Mole crickets have numerous predators, however, rarely do these predators exhibit complete control of the mole crickets. 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 now, during the time when the crickets are in their early stages of development. Chemicals come in sprays, granules or baits. Irrigating before an insecticide application may drive mole crickets closer to the soil surface, and helps the pesticide to penetrate into the soil. Some insecticides should be watered in after application to move them into the root zone of the plants where the mole crickets are feeding. However, it is essential to read and understand the insecticide label carefully for application directions.

Information for this article was taken from the University of Florida/IFAS publication "Pest Mole Crickets". For a
free copy of this publication, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to answer your gardening questions Monday thru Friday from 10am to 2pm.

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