

Troublesome Turf Pests

By Douglas A. Spilker, Ph.D.

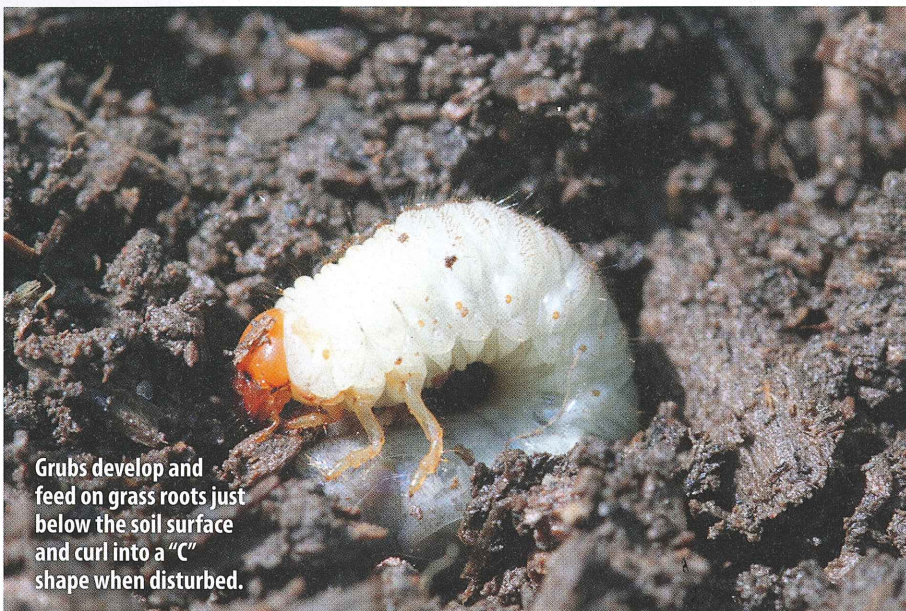
Turf insects are notorious for causing broad-scale damage to lawns, especially in early to late summer. What's eating your grass? Find out here.

How can it happen? Just when your yard looks perfect, lawn areas start to turn brown from insect damage. Although disease can be a problem, turf insects are notorious for causing broad-scale damage to lawns, especially in early to late summer. Various turf insects can be found throughout the grass profile. Some insects inhabit the soil or thatch, feeding on roots (for example grubs), while others feed on leaves and stems (such as caterpillars and chinch bugs).

Soil Inhabiting White Grubs

Pests that destroy turf roots are the most devastating. White grubs are the most significant in this group. White grubs are the larvae of Japanese beetles, June beetles and masked chafers. Grubs are milky white with a brownish head, and curl into a "C" shape when disturbed. They can be found just under the soil surface and cause damage by feeding on grass roots, resulting in desiccation and potential plant death. These are the same beetles that buzz outdoor lights or bang windows around the Fourth of July. The typical life cycle of the annual grub (such as the Japanese beetle) begins with egg hatch in midsummer, with the larvae growing and feeding through fall.

Ironically, the moist, loose soil of healthy lawns is very attractive to female beetles since it is easier for them to dig and lay eggs. Fine and tall fescues seem to be less attractive than Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass lawns. Since moisture is necessary for egg hatch and larval growth, letting your lawn go dormant and



Grubs develop and feed on grass roots just below the soil surface and curl into a "C" shape when disturbed.



Japanese beetles are doubly damaging to the landscape since the adults feed on ornamentals, and their larvae feed on grass roots.

Turf Talk Tidbits

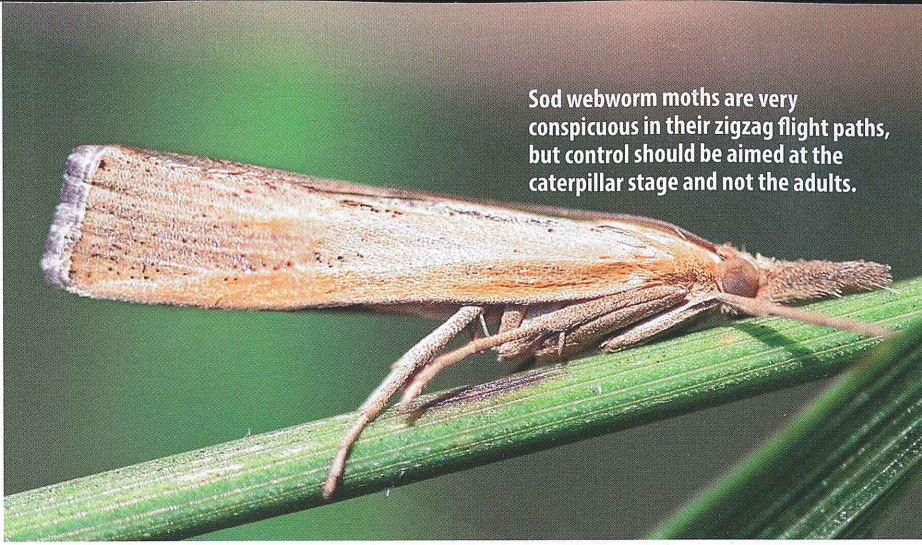
- Those clusters of tiny light-colored insects springing up when you walk across the grass or mow are not chiggers or fleas, but rather leafhoppers. These sucking pests are rarely in high enough numbers to do lawn damage.
- Japanese beetle pheromone traps hung outdoors encourage greater numbers of beetles to your yard and gardens than would normally visit. Not a good thing.
- Controlling grubs will not discourage moles. Although moles do eat grubs, a large portion of their diet is earthworms. However, by controlling grubs, you may avoid the ugly mess created when skunks, raccoons and birds tear up your lawn looking for a tasty meal.



Waiting too long to consider pest control can result in the need for lawn renovation.



Chinch bug damage is often confused with drought stress. Can you tell who treated?



Sod webworm moths are very conspicuous in their zigzag flight paths, but control should be aimed at the caterpillar stage and not the adults.

withholding intensive irrigation during summer may deter grub development and damage. However, in lawns with a history of grub problems, consider a preventive insecticide application made when the grubs are small and actively feeding, around midsummer. Since the grubs are just below the soil surface, be sure to water after the treatment as directed by the label. Waiting to treat until you see damage by grubs can be risky, since turf recovery is unlikely if too many roots are gone, and major lawn renovation might be needed.

Leaf and Stem Feeders

Pests that eat foliage (for example caterpillars) or suck plant juices (such as chinch bugs) may cause turf thinning, poor growth or browning of leaves, but rarely cause dead grass. However, thinning provides an opportunity for weeds to take hold. Caterpillars, which are moth larvae, are the major insect pests that actually eat turf foliage. Caterpillars hide in the thatch during the day and emerge at night to feed on grass blades. Armyworms, with their conspicuous body stripes, only occur periodically, but they make the news when they “march en masse” across lawns.

Probably the most common leaf-feeding pest seen by homeowners is the sod webworm. Sod webworm moths hide in the grass and take flight when disturbed by mowing or other lawn activities. These cream-colored moths fly in a zigzag pattern. The mere presence of the adults does not mean that there is a major sod webworm problem. During summer turf dormancy, the small larval stage (less than 1 inch long) can thin out turf, but rarely do they kill entire lawn areas, so some damage can be tolerated.

Chinch bugs are tiny insects that suck plant juices instead of chewing on leaf blades. High populations can cause broad lawn discoloration, which is often confused with drought stress. In contrast to white grubs, chinch bugs occur mostly under dry conditions so they are rarely found on irrigated lawns. Chinch bugs overwinter as adults and will therefore occur in the same places year after year. A fall insecticide spray might be needed to break this cycle if routine damage is intolerable.

If your lawn has been diagnosed with a foliar pest problem, remember the zone of activity for these pests. Since they are feeding on the upper part of the plant, treatment sprays that stay up on the foliage are more effective than granular applications. Do not water-in the treatment unless specified by the label.

Pest Management Strategies

The approach for lawn pest control will depend on your tolerance of damage and your expectation for the aesthetics of your lawn. You can do nothing and accept the damage, or try to mask it with additional fertilizer and water. In areas with a history of pest reoccurrence, preventive treatments to eliminate populations early before damage occurs might be a wise choice. Using a rescue treatment after injury has occurred is the riskiest approach since turf is a perennial and not easily replaced if damaged. Watch for unusual changes in your lawn, and you might be able to head off pest problems before they lead to yet another lawn renovation project. ♡

Douglas A. Spilker, Ph.D., is a consulting ornamental plant pathologist and entomologist, garden writer and lecturer. Dr. Doug can be reached at askdrdoug@gmail.com.



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