

Fall Lawn & Garden

SPECIAL SECTION 2011

TERRIBLE TUNNELERS

Eliminate moles by tackling their food source

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There's no shortage of products that aim to keep moles under control, from traditional traps and poison to more eco-friendly repellents – even systems to blast the tunnel structures by detonating mixtures of propane and oxygen – but to rid your lawn of these unwanted excavators, remove the temptations.

You may never see the destructive diggers, but they're hard at work hunting for their next meal, which wreaks havoc on your lawn and in your flower beds and garden.

"Moles spend nearly 100 percent of their time underground, feeding on invertebrate animals," explains Missy Henriksen, vice president of public affairs for the National Pest Management Association. "They damage lawns as they tunnel underground in search of worms and insects to eat. Their tunnels undermine grass roots, disfigure lawns and destroy flower beds."

Well-aerated, moist soil with an abundant food supply makes for prime mole territory, but it also makes for a healthy lawn.

"Reducing moisture and compacting soil can help reduce the attractiveness of a lawn to moles, but it also may not be healthy for the grass," Henriksen says.

"Grubs are one of the favorite foods of moles, so controlling grubs in lawns can reduce the food supply."

Grubs, the white C-shaped larvae of many common beetle species, feed on plant roots just below the surface, and to moles, they read like a neon sign at an all-you-can-eat buffet.

"Moles can do great damage to vegetation. They tear up roots, not intentionally, but because grubs live near roots," says Michael Podlesny, author of "Vegetable Gardening for the Average Person." "Get rid of the grubs and you will get rid of the moles. Once the grubs are gone, the moles will move on to find a food source elsewhere."

Podlesny recommends milky spores to eradicate the larvae, which are vegetation destroyers in their own right. The naturally occurring bacteria, available at hardware and home improvement stores, are not

harmful to pets, people or other creatures, and one application can last 10 to 15 years.

A grub-specific insecticide, such as Scotts GrubEx or Bayer Advanced's season-long grub control, is another option. This type of product kills the larvae in the early stages of development, before they damage vegetation. The granules are applied to turf once each season, typically in late spring, and last all summer.

And of course, homeowners besieged by unwanted mounds and tunnels have undoubtedly heard a few clever yarns on do-it-yourself mole removal, from flushing them out with a garden hose to dropping

mothballs in the tunnels. These DIY mole management techniques, born of frustration and old-fashioned American ingenuity, may sound more like farmers' folklore than they do proven techniques, yet those who rely on the methods swear by their success.

Homeowner Mike Kiger, for example, tempts the tenacious burrowers with chewing gum. He calls it "the poor man's method" -- a stick of Juicy Fruit gum rolled into a ball and dropped in a mole hole. Apparently, the pesky vermin have a penchant for the one-of-a-kind flavor.

"The moles are attracted to the scent," Kiger explains. "They eat it, and it gums up their insides and kills them. The gum is cheaper than other things -- and no chemicals needed."

Homeowner Denise Martin has a decidedly more laid-back approach.

"I just dig a deeper hole in their tunnel and bury rocks in it," Martin says. "With this method, I can lead them out of the garden and into the natural areas of my property. And instead of moaning about what

a burden they are, I rejoice in the beautiful pile of finely tilled soil they leave behind when they dig a hole. I use it for planting."

Ready-made mole repellents, poison and traps are also viable remedies, but in many ways, killing and repelling the pesky insectivores is like treating the symptom and not the disease. Eliminate the moles' food source and they will have no reason to visit.



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WATERING METHODS

Get your plants ready for winter

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Trees, shrubs and flowering plants may seem happy in the cooler fall months, but now is the time to be sure they're getting the water they need to stay full and healthy and have their root systems be adequately satiated so that they have the power to withstand the cold, harsh winter.

Your watering regimen will depend, of course, on whether your trees and shrubs are newly planted or more established. According to the experts at the New York Botanical Garden, you should "water your trees well when they are newly planted. Give them a deep soak on the day of planting, and then come back the next day and soak them again. The ground around the root ball of the tree will take up most of the water from the first day, and the second watering ensures that the root ball gets soaked."

Soaking the root ball encourages it to grow below ground, sending out a strong network of additional roots. If you do not give newly planted trees and shrubs this daily watering to start them off or water often during the first weeks of their planting, the root balls will not send off systems of roots, or those roots will extend sideways, not deep into the earth as you want them to. When a newly planted tree or shrub does not get adequate watering during fall plantings, the root ball can shrink, creating an air pocket around it that can cause your plant to suffer over time or not survive the winter.

The New York Botanical Garden's expert team says, "Once your tree is established, be vigilant about your watering for at least two years. It is important to remember to water during dry spells in the summer and fall."

*Protecting During Winter

David Beaulieu, the About.com gardening guide, warns about the damage that trees and small plants of any establishing stage can experience during the winter. "The winter damage to which trees and shrubs are susceptible often stems from their inability to draw water from the frozen earth," he says. "Although we don't necessarily equate wintry conditions with desert conditions, the winter landscape in cold climates is, essentially, a desert, making plants susceptible to winter-burn." Properly watering the plants in fall, then, can minimize injury to trees and shrubs during the winter.

Another winter threat that can be minimized with fall watering is root damage caused by the seeping in of salt from nearby road treatments. Salt applied to roads and then plowed onto your property, carried farther onto your lawn and garden beds by melting and winter precipitation, can damage your

plants' roots. So when you experience a "winter thaw" day, it's wise to give your trees, shrubs and small plants a good watering a few hours before temperatures are expected to drop below freezing. The wash of clean water carries salt buildup away and gives your plant a

