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Lawns, Gophers & Moles

By Thomas Leo Ogren

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A few gophers can tear up a nice lawn in short order. Even if you're a complete animal lover, you won't want the gophers in your yard. After they destroy your lawn they'll start eating the roots and killing your roses, fruit trees, any attempt at a vegetable garden, the bulbs you plant and so forth. Gophers and gardening don't go together at all! The gophers got to go.

I have had many run ins with gophers in my years of gardening and I've always been successful in getting them out of the lawn and garden. I don't like killing them or any animals for that matter, but with gophers, they usually don't give you much choice.

Poisons

Resist the urge to use gopher or mole poisons. The poisons only work so-so, and the poisoned rodents may easily be eaten by an owl, snake, cat, or fox, and then they'll die too. If the predators are killed off the rodent population, unchecked, will quickly explode in number.

Barn Owls

If you're out in the country one of the best ways to get rid of both gophers and moles is to put up nesting boxes for barn owls. These big nesting boxes are generally perched on the top of 11 to 20-foot tall poles. The boxes and their poles are placed away from the house but not too far from the lawns and yards. A nesting family of barn owls will eat thousands of rodents each season, and they are very good at catching gophers and moles. If you live in an area where palm trees grow, and you do not trim off the dead branches that accumulate below the crown, sooner or later a barn owl will move in and set up home. Take advantage of this and leave a palm tree unshowered. The incredible number of rats, mice, moles, ground squirrels, and gophers they'll kill and eat is quite incredible. I now see in many orchards and vineyards, where they have put up these owl boxes. The owls are saving the farmers a lot of money.

Nesting boxes for barn owls are usually made from plywood and the roofs are slanted so water will run off. Sometimes the roofs are shingled too. A nesting box for barn owls should be a minimum of 12 x 12 inches for the floor and at least 16 inches deep.

The box should have small drain holes placed in the floor, in the corners.

Small holes should be drilled around the top of the box on each side for air circulation.

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It is best to build the box so that it can be cleaned out easily once a year when the owls are gone. The box should have only one opening and this must be at least 3 ½ inches in diameter but not more than 5 inches wide. Too large an entrance hole will let great horned owls in and they'll eat up the barn owls. Horned owls eat rodents too, but are not nearly as tough on rodents as the smaller barn owls. *For a place to buy good owl boxes already made (they'll ship them to you) see the Owl Nestbox Resource Page under the links section of this book. At this site you can also find more detailed instructions on building your own owl boxes. The bottom line with barn owls is they are the most effective rodent killers in existence.

The right family cat can also be a pretty good rodent catcher.

Gopher snakes!

I also know of quite a few people who have caught gopher snakes and then released them on their own property. The best way to catch a gopher snake or two is to drive very slowly in the country on a

paved road that gets very little traffic. Pin the snake's head down with a stick, pick it up firmly from behind the head, and stick him in an old pillow sack. They're not poisonous but will often bite and the bites don't feel good either. The best time to go looking for gopher snakes is in spring and early summer, just before and just after dark. Evenings that are cold and windy will produce no snakes and nights with full moons are likewise not productive. Gopher snakes are, like barn owls, designed by nature to catch and eat gophers and moles.

Gopher traps

There are a number of gopher traps on the market but by far the best is the old Maccabee gopher trap made of heavy wire. These are tricky to set if you've never done it before, so buy them at a farm supply store and ask someone there to show you exactly how to set one before you leave the store.

Trapping gophers is very effective if done right.

1. Tie a wire about two feet long on the end of the gopher trap and secure it to a sturdy metal or wooden stake.
2. Find the newest, freshest gopher mound.
3. Dig out the opening of the mound with a shovel, open up the tunnel and place the trap as far into the hole as possible.
4. Pound the stake down near the hole but not into the tunnel itself. The stake and wire will insure that you don't lose the trap. A trapped gopher may easily draw the attention of a cat, dog, hawk, owl, skunk or fox, and they'll run off with your gopher and your trap. The wire and stake keep that from happening.
5. Leave the opening of the hole open. The light coming into the hole will serve as bait, since the gophers intended for that hole to be closed.
6. Set several traps in different holes if possible.
7. Check the traps at least once a day and re-set them if you've killed a gopher or if the gopher has set off the trap and gotten away.

Water, smoke bombs, and road flares

Sometimes you can get the gophers, and moles too, to move out of your territory just by flooding their holes. By all means go ahead and stick the garden hose down a few holes and give this a try. Usually though, flooding them doesn't work very well, if at all.

Smoking them out works much better than flooding them. There are special gopher smoker bombs made and sold in all good nurseries and these work pretty well. What works even better than the gopher bombs are regular red road flares. You can buy road flares very cheaply too, at an auto parts

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store. They will usually come in several lengths and the longer ones burn longer and are more effective. At any rate road flares of any length work pretty well.

Dig out the gopher mound and open up the tunnel. Light the road flare by twisting off the cap and then striking the tip of the flare with the end of the cap. Point it away from yourself so you don't get burned. Shove the lit end of the road flare into the gopher tunnel and then shovel some dirt back over the top of the opening. Stamp it all shut tight with the sole of your shoe. You'll see some of the smoke escaping up through the dirt. If you spot smoke coming up from another hole in the lawn, quickly go over there and plug up that hole.

The smoke from road flares is sulfur smoke and it will stink out the entire tunnel. On occasion the gophers will be asphyxiated from the smoke and will die in the tunnels. More often though, they will take off for an area not anywhere near that stinky sulfur smoke. The smoke and its smell will persist in the tunnel for some time and the gophers will often simply abandon the tunnel.

The gophers may well make several more attacks on your lawn and flower beds and you may need to smoke them several times and in several different tunnels to get rid of them. If the smoking doesn't work for you, buy some gopher traps.... or get a gopher snake.

Moles

Gophers are much larger than moles and they dig much larger holes and tunnels too. Gopher tunnels

are often fairly deep into the ground but mole tunnels often run just under the surface of the lawn. Often you can just look at the lawn and see exactly where these mole tunnels are because they are pushed up just under the surface of the lawn.

Gophers come into an area to eat the plants but moles are insect eaters and they don't actually eat any of your lawn at all. Moles seem to be much more common in high rainfall areas and are uncommon in drier, irrigated lawn areas.

Moles and grubs

There are many different traps made for killing moles but resist the urge to buy and use these. Poison baits for moles are not a good idea either. The moles are tunneling through your lawn for a reason. If you have moles in the lawn, you can be assured that you also have a lot of grubs in the lawn too. The moles are eating these grubs. The grubs can be up to about an inch long and they are usually white or gray and often have brown heads. Areas where grub infestations are especially thick will often show patches of lawn dying from the grubs.

Grubs or Dogs?

If you have a dead patch of lawn where the center of the patch is totally dead but the edges of the patch are extra green, this damage isn't from grubs, it's from dog urine. The nitrogen in the urine fertilizes the lawn that it doesn't outright overdose and kill. This is why the edges of the patch will be greener than the rest of the lawn.

Skunks?

Sometimes a grub-infested lawn will attract nighttime raids by skunks. The skunks (and occasionally raccoons too) will tear up pieces of your lawn as they dig up the grubs to eat. The solution here is much the same as it is for getting rid of the moles.

If the moles eat up all the grubs in your lawn they'll move on to a new grub-filled area. Of course, in the process they'll tear up your lawn. So, what to do? The most obvious answer is to kill off the grubs in the lawn. These grubs are larvae from any number of insect pests, and in the lawn they are also important pests of the lawn. Left unchecked, the grubs may well destroy most of your lawn by themselves.

There are a number of organic or inorganic methods of killing off lawn grubs. Flooding the lawn seems to help to bring the grubs up closer to the surface, where they'll be easier to kill. Look for sources of these bio-controls in the Links section of this book, under IPM. IPM is short for integrated pest management and it is often very effective and safe.

Most of the soil grubs are larvae of some kind or other of beetle. If the grubs are larvae of Japanese Beetles they can be attacked with Milky spore, which is an organic product that only attacks Japanese Beetles. There are bio-controls, safe biological agents that kill soil grubs. *Heterorhabditis bacteriophora* nematodes have shown good results for white grub control. Nematodes are tiny soil wireworms. This particular species will find the white grubs and kill them. These beneficial nematodes are available in mail order catalogs, often sold as Hb nematodes. They should be applied to already thoroughly watered lawns late in the day and then watered in immediately.

These nematodes will not damage the lawn or other garden plants. Nematodes work fastest in sandy soils and slower in heavy, clay soils.

Organic insecticides can also be used as a drench on your lawns and sometimes they're quite effective. A mix of water, soap, pyrethrum and rotenone will often kill most of the grubs. Even organic insecticides though will also kill off earthworms and other beneficial soil organisms.

Chemical control

For a chemical approach, a single treatment can be made between mid-July to mid-August. Commonly used chemical insecticides are chlorpyrifos (Dursban), carbaryl (Sevin), and soil diazinon. The pesticide must be watered into the soil well after use, or it won't be effective.

Keep in mind that none of these chemical insecticides are healthful for the family dog, cat, the kids, or for the songbirds that might well eat some of the chemically poisoned earthworms or grubs.

Some lawn experts will recommend use of the chemicals trichlorfon (Dylox), imidacloprid (Merit), or halofenozide (GrubEx) in mid-summer as a preventative measure against lawn grubs.

Other preventative measures

· Keeping a lawn healthy won't keep grubs and moles out of it, but a healthy lawn can recuperate much faster after attack.

· Mowing the lawn too short will weaken a lawn and make it more easily damaged by grubs. Mowing higher promotes a stronger root system. There is evidence too that grubs, as with most insect pests, will attack an unhealthy lawn before they do a healthy one.

· Keeping the nitrogen levels up and maintaining a good amount of humus in the soil sometimes helps to lessen the chance of grub damage. Grubs will attack any species of lawn, although the worst damage is usually seen on bluegrass lawns.

· Aerating the lawn makes for stronger roots and it also gives birds a better shot at picking out these grubs. Many birds that are attracted to our birdfeeders and suet feeders also will eat both the grubs and the beetles that the grubs come from. Encourage wild birds in your yard.

· When you water, water deeply. This will also help develop a stronger root system.

· Over-seed bluegrass lawns each spring with a mix of fescue or perennial ryegrass seed. If the grubs ruin the bluegrass, you'll still have a lawn.

· In heavily grub-damaged lawns, take a rake and rake the exposed soil up; this will expose the grubs to the birds.

· Soak grub infected areas with soapy water. Use a quart of liquid dish soap to several gallons of water and soak the lawn with this mix. It will kill grubs.

· Sometimes grubs can be held in check by dusting the lawn several times with diatomaceous earth.

This safe product kills grubs that come to the surface and eat the grass leaves.

·Lastly, some people put on those spiked strap on sandals and walk around on their lawn, spearing grubs as they walk. Of course they're also aerating the lawn at the same time. I have no idea how effective this method is, but hey, it can't hurt.

Thomas Ogren is the author of Allergy-Free Gardening, Ten Speed Press. Tom does consulting work on for the USDA, county asthma coalitions, and the American Lung Associations. He has appeared on CBS, HGTV and The Discovery Channel. His book, Safe Sex in the Garden, was published 2003. In 2004 Time Warner Books published his latest: What the Experts May NOT Tell You About: Growing the Perfect Lawn. His website: www.allergyfree-gardening.com

Hills and holes: Not part of your landscaping design?

By L. J. Bruton

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Do pests 'gopher' your lawn? Chances are, if you have a lawn, you risk the chance of having pests, such as the gopher and his cousin the mole. And, perhaps even those pesky six-legged creatures—ants and other insects—call your grass patches home. Why are these animals and insects attracted to your lawn? And, what can you do to stop them from burrowing and nesting? Those answers and more will follow in this article.

Most household lawns are not large enough to attract so many pests that a serious problem will result, but nonetheless, they can be a nuisance and cause some minor damage to your grassy nook. Insects are not very easy to spot, as some are so small they are naked to the eye, however, they can be identified by dead, brown patches of grass. Telltale signs of moles and gophers are a little more obvious—dirt hills on the top of your lawn, and beneath them, tunnels and holes. Once you identify that you have pests, you then need to decide the best way for you to take care of the problem.

The first option is to call an expert. Use your local directory or a referral from someone you know that had a similar problem. But if you are like most people today, you may want to do it yourself. And, if you are a DIYer, the first thing you need to do is size up your situation, and what you are up against. Let's look at insects first.

When dealing with insects, the first thing you must realize is that not all insects are bad guys. Sure, we probably would swat at them all, but in reality, some insects can actually act as exterminators against others. Other insects can actually help control your thatch level. There are two types of insects when it comes to the ones who invade your lawn: above and below ground insects. Above ground insects usually feed on your grass, and can be seen fairly easy. Some examples of these can be chinch bugs, green bugs and armyworms.

The below ground insects are just that, they feed on your lawn through the root system, which means they are the most destructive of the two. They are also the most difficult to identify since they are not easily seen. These can include grubs, beetle larvae and billbugs. There are literally thousands of

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species of insects, far too many to list here. You could borrow a book on insects from your local library, or check out some entomology websites to learn more about what roles and functions they have. After all, you don't want to kill off any allies!

There are five basic types of treatment for anthills and other insects: chemical insecticides, biological insecticides, botanical insecticides, insecticide soaps and predatory insects (remember– some are your friend!). There may also be specific types for specific insects. Weigh each option and choose which one fits your needs the best.

Moles and gophers are two of the most common animal pests, and due to striking similarities they are often confused. Both animals build tunnels under your lawns, but that does not mean they are the same. These two have many things that set them apart from one another. Moles are smaller than gophers, and have pointed snouts and large front claws. They do not feed on your lawn, but the insects

that dwell within. Sounds like they are helping you with the insects? Maybe, but the moles' tunnels leave mounds of dirt on the ground above, and their shallow tunnels cause uneven ground.

Gophers, the largest of the pesky pair, have buckteeth and small ears. These creatures love to dine on your grass and plant roots. Gophers also leave mounds of dirt, but they do far more damage underground, causing sinkholes. While your green may not encompass as many acres of the turf in the movie *Caddyshack*, they can cause just as much recurring trouble. Getting rids of gophers and moles leads to one grand solution– killing them. There are also more conventional methods, such as traps.

The best way to deal with pests though is to perhaps not have them at all. This can be achieved by taking preventative measures in your lawn. But of course, nature has a mind of its own!

For hundreds of other tips for creating your own perfect lawn, be sure to visit:



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