



# What's Bugging You?

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## THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER

Having a lush, green lawn has long enjoyed a place alongside automobiles and apple pie as an American institution. Like so many components of the American dream, though, a beautiful lawn can be difficult to acquire and even more maddening to maintain.



Between droughts, insects, disease, and the occasional bone-burying escapade by Fido, lawns are vulnerable to a variety of potential pitfalls. As far as insects go, they can be both a cause of unsightly lawn blemishes and a symptom of a poorly kept yard. Keeping a lawn strong and healthful and knowing how to handle problems when they arise will keep lawns green and make neighbors greener with envy.

## MOW ME DOWN



Everyone loves the short, neatly manicured grass of a putting green, but unless you plan on having friends playing nine holes in the backyard, leave the short stuff to the golf courses. Shorter grass weakens root systems and makes lawns more susceptible to damage from disease, dehydration, and pests. The ideal height will depend on the type of grass in your lawn, but generally three inches is a good average height.

"Sometimes people can over-care for their lawns, and actually wind up harming them as much as they are helping them," says Aaron Henson, county extension agent, Frederick, Okla. "Excessive mowing, taking away all the clippings, and excessive fertilization can weaken the roots and make lawns more vulnerable to disease and insect damage."

According to Tony Melton, county extension agent, Florence, S.C., the amount of grass you

take off when you mow is even more important than the overall height.

"A good rule of thumb is never cut off more than a third of the total height of the blades," says Melton. "When you cut off more than that, you're basically decapitating the grass. Not only will you be more likely to build up excessive thatch, but the grass left behind will contain more stem and less of the nutrient-rich blades."

## SOAK IT UP

Plants need water, there's no question about that. But it is possible to have too much of a good thing. Excessive watering not only leads to problems, but also wastes resources. Carefully consider the amount of water your lawn receives. Only put sprinklers into use during periods of inadequate rainfall. Also, water your lawn at a time of day that will benefit the lawn the most.

"The best time of day to water is between midnight and sunrise," says Melton. "It gives the grass time to absorb the water and then dry off during the day. Always give the lawn a good, complete soak. If you do that, watering one to two times per week is plenty."

Typically about an inch of water is considered an adequate soaking, although amounts may vary depending on grass type and climate. Consult your local extension agent for recommendations in your area.



## BALANCING ACT



As is the case with any type of plant, the soil composition is critical to its overall health. Testing your soil composition can provide an insight into what, if any, type of fertilization your lawn may require.

“At the very least, we recommend people test their soil composition once every three years,” says Melton. “It’s even better to do it more frequently, but I would say that is the minimum amount if people want to stay on top of their soil needs.”

Soil tests are available through county extension services and are relatively inexpensive. According to Melton, the rate in South Carolina is \$6. Tests also are available through private lawn care specialists, although those tend to be more expensive.

## PEST SPOTLIGHT: WHITE GRUBS

White grubs are the larval state of a group of beetles collectively known as “scarabs”, with some of the more well-known being June and Japanese beetles, though many other species exist depending on the geographic region. It is not unusual for lawns to have more than one species of white grub simultaneously. White grubs can be a persistent and harmful pest in lawns, causing widespread patches of dead and discolored turf as they feed on and weaken root systems. They can also cause indirect damage from



predators such as moles, opossums, and raccoons digging through soil to feed on the grubs.

Life cycles for white grubs vary depending on the species, lasting anywhere from one to four years, although a three year cycle is most common. In that cycle, adults usually emerge in late spring to early summer. After a period of feeding and mating, females lay eggs in the soil, with grubs emerging a few weeks later. Grubs feed during the warm summer months and then overwinter deep in the soil. During the second year, the grubs will begin feeding in the spring and continue vigorously for four to six months before hibernating again in the fall. White grubs do the most damage during this period. The next year, grubs will feed once again through late summer, then pupate and reach adulthood, usually in early fall. The adults will remain underground once again until they emerge next spring.

If you notice a problem with widespread irregular spots of dead and dying turf, you may have a problem with white grubs. Make sure to confirm, as the damage caused by some diseases can be mistaken for white grubs. The best way to tell is to carefully dig up a few patches of sod and inspect the soil. If you notice five to 10 grubs per square foot or more, it is advisable to treat with an insecticide marked for white grub control in lawns, such as carbaryl. As always, carefully read the instructions from the manufacturer before using an insecticide.

The best time to treat for white grubs is several weeks after the adults have finished emerging from the ground, usually falling in late July or early August in most areas. This is particularly prudent if you have had problems with grubs in the past and noticed a significant amount of activity from Japanese beetles or other similar species during the early summer.

## PEST SPOTLIGHT: ARMYWORMS

Named for the massive groups they form to feed on lawns, pasture, and corn and wheat fields, armyworms are the general term for the larval state of a variety of moth species.

Their color ranges from yellow-green to dark brown or gray, and they have vertical stripes, one down the middle of the back and one on each side. Mature larvae can be as long as two inches. Collectively, their effects on lawns and crops can be devastating if allowed to reach the point of infestation.



“In the case of a serious infestation, fields can be totally destroyed overnight,” says Henson. “Sometimes it actually looks like the ground is moving, there are so many.”

Armyworms are found in much of the country, although they present the biggest problem in the Midwest and south. They spend winter in the soil or under debris and remain active except during extreme cold. Larvae emerge and feed the following spring, then pupate for roughly three weeks before emerging as adults in May and June. After mating, females feed for seven to 10 days before laying eggs in clusters of 25 to 150. A female will lay as many as 2,000 during her lifespan, with the eggs hatching in another six to ten days. The number of generations depends on the region. In warmer southern climates, five or more generations can elapse during a year. In cooler climates, larvae will usually pupate for the last time in early fall and begin development underground during the winter months.

If you discover armyworms on your property, treat them quickly with an insecticide marked for armyworm control, such as carbaryl. As always, carefully read the instructions from the manufacturer before using an insecticide.

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This month’s newsletter was written with the help of [www.thegardenhelper.com](http://www.thegardenhelper.com).

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As with all insecticides, please read and follow the use instructions on the package. For more information about insects and/or carbaryl, log on to [www.gardentech.com](http://www.gardentech.com)

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