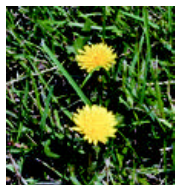




Common Lawn Problems



July 2000

See the other two publications in the Pest Management Regulatory Agency's (PMRA) lawn care series, *Establishing a Lawn* and *Lawn Maintenance*, for a general discussion on lawn health and the prevention and control of pest problems.

Generally, lawn problems fall into one of four categories: (1) weeds or other plants competing with the grass for resources, (2) insects feeding on the grass, (3) diseases of the plants or soil, and (4) animals digging up your lawn to build homes or feed on insects under the grass. Most of these are usually present in your lawn, but can easily become pests if conditions change to favour their increase. Your lawn may have other problems as well, such as dead or brown patches. In most cases, these can be resolved easily using cultural methods, as discussed in *Lawn Maintenance*.

There are several pest notes available from the PMRA that deal directly with specific pests of your lawn, for example, ants, chinch bugs, moles and voles, and white grubs. Contact the Information Service at 1-800-267-6315 or download the notes from the web site at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pmra-arla.

Pest Management

Integrated pest management or IPM is a process for planning and managing sites to prevent pest problems and for making decisions about when and how to intervene

when pest problems occur. In an IPM program, pest managers use regular inspections, called monitoring, to collect the information needed to decide whether or not action must be taken. A key idea in IPM is that it is necessary to take action against pests only when their numbers warrant it, not as a routine measure. In most cases it is only necessary to suppress pest populations to non-damaging levels, not to eliminate them. If treatment is warranted, pest managers choose the most appropriate combination of control measures for the site. You can use these principles in controlling pests around your yard and home.

Many beneficial organisms that might be confused for more harmful ones live in your yard, so for anything that might be a pest, be sure to identify the species accurately. Your local garden centre may be able to help you and there are many good information sources on the web. Also, learn as much as possible about its life cycle and its preferred hosts.

Chemical pesticides are available for controlling pest populations and include herbicides for plants, insecticides for insects, and fungicides for various diseases. They have specific use instructions for certain species and conditions, so check the labels if you're purchasing any products or contact your local lawn care company. Non-chemical alternatives are available for most lawn pests and cultural practices help to eliminate most problems. You can also use a pesticide in a limited area, for example, spot-spraying an infested patch instead of treating the entire lawn.

Weeds



Weeds are any plants growing where you don't want them. Besides being possibly unsightly and affecting the quality and quantity of your lawn or garden

plants, they also compete with your lawn or garden plants for resources such as water, light, nutrients, and space. Common weeds in Canada include dandelions, plantains, chickweed, smooth crabgrass, creeping Charlie, ground ivy, burdock, hawkweed, thistles, lamb's quarter, heal-all, creeping speedwell, creeping buttercup, creeping knotweed, bindweed, and knapweed.

Removing weeds by hand (or a combination of garden tools) is the surest way to control them without using chemical herbicides. This can be important if you have any sensitive plants or a vegetable garden nearby or if children or pets use your property. Another chemical-free method you can try is to put a layer of mulch (5–7 cm or 2–3" thick) on top of the lawn or soil. The mulch might include grass clippings, shredded newspaper, sawdust, and plastic.



Weeds can be most invasive in newly-seeded lawns, where the grass has not yet established itself vigorously. Wait until your new grass has been mowed at least a couple of times if you decide to treat it with a herbicide. Herbicides applied incorrectly can kill the plants you're trying to keep. Fortunately, most

herbicides for domestic use target broadleaved weeds, so grass is not affected by them. Ask at your local home and garden store about new products that are more environmentally friendly.

The best way to avoid weeds is to maintain your lawn's health through using the right grasses for your yard, raising the mowing height, watering and fertilizing as needed, and overseeding. Also, ensure that your lawn's moisture levels are adequate when treating it to avoid any unnecessary stress on it.

One no-cost, no effort alternative to weed control is that of developing a certain level of tolerance for some weeds in your yard.

Insects

Ants

Ants are generally beneficial insects, getting most of their food from scavenging other insects and decaying material. The most common problem with them in your lawn is unsightly mounds, especially if you have sandy soil. They can also be a problem if you want to use your lawn, for example, for a picnic or children's games.



See the PMRA pest note *Effective Control of Ants* for more information about controlling these pests.

Chinch Bugs

Chinch bugs are small insects that suck the sap from your grass, leaving yellow circular patches that become brown and larger throughout the summer. They like thatch and dry conditions, so keep your grass tall and well watered.

See the PMRA pest note *Effective Control of Chinch Bugs* for more information about controlling these pests.

Webworms

Sod webworms are the larval stage of a moth. They are brown, green, or grey with darker heads and they feed on your grass at the base of the stem. One sign that you may have this pest is yellow patches on your lawn that get larger throughout the summer. Another sign you may notice is birds feeding on your lawn. Sod webworms live in tunnels in the soil during the day, but you can see them at night if you go out with a flashlight. They like thatch, so remove any from your lawn, aerate the soil, and seed any bare or thin grass areas.

White Grubs



White grubs are the larval stage of several beetles, in Canada most commonly the June bug or beetle. They are whitish with brown heads and are usually C-shaped. They feed on the roots of many plants, but prefer the fibrous roots of grass. If your lawn has irregular brown patches, try lifting a section. If it can be lifted in one piece, you will probably see grubs underneath.

See the PMRA pest note *Effective Control of White Grubs* for more information about controlling these pests, both in the grub and adult stages.

Diseases

Diseases are commonly caused by poor lawn. Mildew forms in cooler, more shaded areas and looks like grey powder on the lawn. If you have mildew and can do nothing about the shade or temperature in your yard, you may want to plant some alternative ground covers that thrive in those conditions, such as periwinkle, lily of the valley, hostas, or creeping juniper.

Fairy Ring

Fairy rings are circular patches of dead grass that are surrounded by a dark green ring. These usually appear in older lawns and are caused by a fungal infection. They can be difficult to eliminate. If you want to try to do so, use a pitchfork or other spiked garden tool to punch holes in the rings, starting outside the entire ring and working inwards. Be sure to wipe the spikes with rubbing alcohol after you've finished to prevent transferring the disease to other areas of your yard. Once you've punched all the holes, fill them with soapy water every day for a week, then with clean water every day for the next 2 months.

Mushrooms

Mushrooms are indicators that something is decaying in your lawn, such as an old tree. They will usually disappear if you pick them or break them apart.



Powdery Mildew

Mildew forms in cooler, more shaded areas and looks like grey powder on the lawn. If you have mildew and can do nothing about the shade or temperature in your yard, you may want to plant some alternative ground covers that thrive in those conditions, such as periwinkle, lily of the valley, hostas, or creeping juniper.

Pythium Blight

Pythium blight appears as small reddish-brown patches on your lawn, and may spread very quickly in hot, humid weather and along drainage routes. Grass areas that are poorly drained or in high traffic areas are particularly susceptible to this disease. Keep your soil aerated, water the lawn early in the day, re-seed or re-sod any bare or thin patches, and use resistant grass varieties.

Fusarium blight, dollar spot, and brown patch are other diseases that affect the health of your lawn. As with all lawn diseases, these can be difficult to identify, so call your local lawn care company for help if you're not sure before treating for a specific problem.

Animals

Moles and Voles

Moles are small grey animals that tunnel just under the surface of your grass, cutting through the root layer and leaving roots exposed to dry out and die. While generally beneficial to lawns because they eat many insects and larvae, their tunnels damage the appearance and physical stability of your lawn. The moles can also spread lawn diseases from one area of your yard to another through their activities and their tunnels are used by other small creatures, including voles.

Voles, or field mice, will actually feed on your plant roots, and gain access to them frequently by the mole tunnels discussed above.

See the PMRA pest note *Effective Control of Moles and Voles (Field Mice)* for further information about managing these pests.

Raccoons and Skunks

Raccoons and skunks are generally digging up your lawn for white grubs and other insects, so once you've eliminated those pest problems you should not see them bothering your grass much.



Remember

Before Purchasing a Pesticide Product

- Identify the pest correctly.
- Use physical control methods and alternatives to pesticides.
- Read the label directions and safety precautions before buying the product. The label must include the name of the pest to be controlled and the treatment location (e.g., indoor, outdoor, garden uses, pet treatment).
- Purchase only the quantity of product needed for the treatment.
- Alternatively, you may choose to hire a licensed pest control operator.

When Using a Pesticide

- Carefully read all label instructions and precautions before using pesticides.
- Do not drink, eat or smoke while applying pesticides.
- Persons and pets should vacate the area during treatment. Cover or remove aquaria.
- If kitchen area is to be treated, cover or remove food, dishes and utensils.

After Handling a Pesticide

- Always wash your hands thoroughly after handling any pesticide product.
- Do not permit persons or pets to contact treated surfaces until residue has dried completely.
- Provide adequate ventilation of treated areas after use.
- Wipe clean all surfaces that comes in direct contact with food, such as counters, tables and stovetops, including indoor and outdoor surfaces.
- Always store pesticides out of reach of children and pets and away from food and beverages.

In Case of Accidental Poisoning

- Call a poison control centre immediately and seek medical attention.
- Take the pesticide container or label with you to the emergency facility or physician.
- Follow first aid statements on the label.
- In case of accidental poisoning of pets seek veterinary attention immediately.



When Disposing of Pesticides

Do not reuse empty pesticide containers. Wrap and dispose of in household garbage.

Unused or partially used pesticide products should be disposed of at provincially or municipally designated household hazardous waste disposal sites.

Use Common Sense

- These are general recommendations.
- Consult the label for specific instructions.
- When in doubt, contact a professional.

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Some photographs courtesy of the Kansas Dept. of Agriculture, Plant Protection and Weed Control Program.