



Common Lawn Problems

Fact Sheet



Photo: M.G. Klein, USDA
Agricultural Research Service

Photo: Steven Katovich, USDA Forest Service

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ISBN: 978-0-662-05759-8

Catalogue Number: H114-15/1-2008

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Common Lawn Problems

Lawn pests fall into one of four categories:

- weeds or other plants competing with the grass for resources
- insects feeding on the grass
- plant diseases
- small animals digging up your grass to feed on insects or plants

Any of these can be found in your lawn, but they only become pests if conditions change to favour their increase.

Prevention is the best approach for managing pests. This includes many of the cultural practices described for the establishment and maintenance of a lawn. See the pamphlets *Starting a Lawn* and *Lawn Maintenance*.

If you keep your lawn healthy using good maintenance practices, it will be less susceptible to pest damage and usually will not require pesticides.



Photo: David Cappaert, Michigan State University

Pest Management

Learn to manage pest problems by following integrated pest management (IPM) principles. IPM puts the emphasis on prevention, looks at all available information and considers all management options before deciding on the most effective, environmentally friendly and cost effective means of managing a pest problem.

Check the lawn regularly.

Regular inspection of the lawn makes it possible to detect pests and other problems early.

Make sure pest problems are identified correctly.

- Beneficial insects may be mistaken for pests.
- Plant damage may not be caused by pests. Plants can be injured by poor growing conditions, poor maintenance practices, or environmental problems such as road salt or dog urine.
- You need to identify the pest to look up its life cycle and other information that will help you decide if and when to apply treatments and how to prevent further problems.

- Your local garden centre may be able to help you in identifying a pest, and there are many good sources of information on the Internet or in reference books.

Once you've found and identified a pest in your lawn, check for damage and decide whether action is necessary.

- A few weeds or insects in a healthy lawn may not be a cause for concern.
- Keep an eye on the pest problem and get more information if necessary before deciding whether or not a treatment is needed. If so, know how and when to apply it.

Recurring pest problems are often a sign that lawn care practices need to change.

- Examine your lawn care program and the lawn condition to see if anything needs to be done differently.
- Improving your lawn care practices gives long-lasting results and reduces pest problems.





Weeds

Healthy lawns are less susceptible to weed problems.

- They smother weeds and also prevent their seeds from germinating.

Before resorting to herbicides, try improving the general condition of your lawn by aerating, overseeding and occasionally weeding by hand.

- Hand weeding is recommended if you have sensitive plants or a vegetable garden and are concerned about spray drift.

Tolerating some weeds is a no-cost, no-effort alternative to weed control.

Weeds could be a bigger problem in a newly seeded lawn that has not yet established a vigorous stand. Good planning and soil preparation will minimize weed problems and promote quick establishment of the lawn.





Insects

In a healthy lawn, beneficial insects can keep pest insects in check. For more information on beneficial insects, see the pamphlet *Life of a Lawn*.

Ants are sometimes considered pests because they make visible mounds (ant hills) on lawns. They do not attack the grass.

Some common insect pests found in home lawns include:

- chinch bugs
- white grubs
- sod webworms



Be aware of the types of conditions they prefer so you can better prevent their establishment.

- Chinch bugs prefer dry lawns with excessive thatch.
- Adult beetles and chafers, the source of the white grub infestations, prefer laying their eggs in short grass.
- Sod webworms prefer sunny south-facing slopes where it is hot and dry.

For information about managing some lawn pests, see the following Pest Notes available from the Pest Management Information Service:

- *Ants*
- *Chinch Bugs*
- *White Grubs*



Diseases

Lawn diseases can be difficult to identify and are often confused with other problems such as poor growing conditions, damage from fertilizer burn, dog urine or road salt.

Some of the diseases that may occasionally affect your lawn include powdery mildew, necrotic ring spot, dollar spot, leaf spot and rust.

Good mowing and watering practices as well as using a balanced fertilizer with adequate potassium levels and not too much nitrogen help to prevent lawn diseases. Removing thatch and increasing air flow near the surface are common cultural practices for controlling turfgrass diseases.

If you're not sure about what action to take for a specific problem, call your local lawn care company for help.



Photo: Clemson University, USDA Cooperative Extension Slide Series

Fairy rings

Fairy rings are circular or semicircular patches of dead grass with an inner green ring. They usually appear in lawns 5 to 15 years old and can be caused by a number of different fungi. The fungus feeds on the thatch, and the ring grows outward. The fungus is not toxic to the grass, but it prevents water from penetrating into the grass root area causing the grass to die and allowing weeds to take root and infest that area.

Fairy rings are difficult to control. To slow their spread, poke holes in the grass surface just outside the dead ring using a garden fork, soak with soapy water and water frequently to increase moisture. To get rid of the rings completely, cut out the dead patch. Re-seed or re-sod the dead areas.



Photo: Robert L. Anderson, USDA Forest Service

Animals

Avoid problems with animal pests by eliminating potential food sources around your yard.



Vole Photo: Laurie Smith, USDA Photo

Moles and Voles (field mice)

Small animals like moles and voles sometimes tunnel in your lawn in search of food. Tunnelling by moles exposes root systems, then voles and other rodents move in and eat the roots. For further information, see the Pest Note *Moles and Voles* (Field Mice) available from the Pest Management Information Service.



Raccoons and skunks

Raccoons and skunks generally dig up your lawn looking for white grubs and other insects. Once you've managed the insect pests, raccoons and skunks should no longer bother your lawn.

Letting Someone Else Maintain Your Lawn

If you prefer to let an expert take care of your lawn, find out what type of services the companies in your area offer and the results you can expect.

- There is a wide range of services available for lawn maintenance and pest control. Some are marketed as “Integrated Pest Management”, “Organic” or “Pesticide-free” programs.
- Find out what lawn care practices the companies include with their programs and choose the one that is right for you.
- Avoid lawn care programs that regularly apply pesticides whether or not pests are present.

If pesticides are used, make sure that they are used as part of an IPM program.

Pesticide Use

Pesticides include herbicides for weeds, insecticides for insects and fungicides for diseases. Their labels provide specific use instructions and describe the conditions

under which they can be applied. These instructions must be followed. Most lawn pesticides do not prevent pest problems. They only control pests once they are present.



Before purchasing a pesticide product

- Identify the pest correctly.
- Use physical control methods.
- Read the label to know what pest you can treat with the product and where to use it
- Read the safety precautions.
- Purchase only the quantity of product needed for the treatment.

If you use a pesticide

Always read and follow all label directions and precautions for:

- preparation
- handling
- application
- storage and disposal

Only apply it when and where the pest is present.

Minimize the use of pesticides

- Keep your lawn healthy.
- Use spot treatments rather than broadcast applications.
- Only treat the problem area or plants.
- Time applications correctly to avoid the need for repeat treatments.

Correct timing of pesticide applications will depend on the susceptible life stage of the pest and environmental conditions.

