

(Fall) Armyworms

Armyworms are not actually worms. They are the larvae, or caterpillar, of a moth and they love to eat grassy plants. They prefer grain crops (peanuts, cotton, soybean, wheat), but they can spill over into nearby lawns and move from lawn to lawn from there. Large numbers can consume all above-ground plant parts, and they are capable of killing or severely retarding the growth of grasses. The overall numbers are more pronounced in dry years.

Fall armyworms don't necessarily wait until the fall to do their damage. Larvae are present by late July, so they are here now. They produce several generations per summer, but the September generation is the one that damages lawns.

Caterpillars or mature larvae are green, brown or almost black and about 1-1/2 to 2 inches long, with black and reddish brown stripes on each side of the body and four small, black spots on the dorsal side of each abdominal segment, with a marked pale, inverted "Y" on the front of the black head capsule.

If you find a patch of lawn suddenly wilting, move the grass aside and look at the soil. If you see several beige-gray caterpillars eating the grass at the soil-line, you probably have armyworms. But, to effectively search for them, mix one tablespoon of liquid dish washing soap to a gallon of water and pour it onto a square-foot area of grass. This should bring worms to the surface within a few minutes and you can see them by separating the blades of grass. You should do this on two or more areas of the lawn and compare results.

If you find two to three worms per area, you should treat the lawn.

Preventive treatment is not recommended because the outbreaks are so unpredictable and the natural enemies of the armyworms may keep a minor infestation at bay. And insecticides, if used without documenting a significant number of pests, may accidentally kill off the good insects that feed on the armyworms that help to keep them in check. However, if the lawn is being clearly damaged or if you find significant numbers as described above, you should treat.

The treatment options include many different insecticides. Generally, any one labeled for caterpillar control in turf should work. These include preparations containing acephate, carbaryl, cyfluthrin, permethrin and others.

There are two environmentally-friendly biological treatments that are effective - *Bacillus thuringiensis* or "Bt" and spinosad. Both are classified as organics. Bt is a bacteria that is harmful to caterpillars once they eat it, but it is safe to use around children, pets and wildlife (other than butterflies). Some older caterpillars may not die immediately after eating Bt, but they will no longer feed. It is effective not only for armyworms but most other caterpillars in the lawn or garden as well.