

Controlling Moles and Gophers

In addition to beautiful spring blooms, many residents have noticed some unwanted visitors in their lawns. Oklahoma is home to two very widespread and abundant ground-dwelling creatures. Both pocket gophers and moles can wreak havoc on even the best-maintained lawns. Being able to distinguish between the two animals and then subsequently establishing a method to eliminate your particular pest will put you on the road to a more pleasant gardening season.

Pocket gophers are found primarily in loose soils and tend to avoid the tight clay soils found in some areas of the state. They are stocky, short-legged and medium-sized rodents. Their bodies are well adapted for digging. Pocket gophers have exposed, yellowish, chisel-like, incisor teeth and have deep external cheek pouches where they carry their food. Two species, the Plains pocket gopher and the Mexican pocket gopher, can be found in Oklahoma.

One of the most important characteristics of the pocket gopher that distinguishes it from moles is diet. Pocket gophers survive on a plant-based diet consisting of mostly tubers and roots. They feed primarily on the roots of trees, grasses, alfalfa, and dandelions but can also be found eating seeds, leaves and tender stems. Hostas tend to be a gopher favorite. When hostas experience a rapid decline, gopher damage should be considered.

Moles, on the other hand, are insectivores and survive primarily on earthworms. They may also eat grubs and other insects. Moles have a slender, conical snout, small needle-like teeth, and broad front feet with heavy claws. They lack the dental structure to survive on plants. Some consider moles to be a beneficial garden animal because of their ability to help eliminate some of the unwanted garden pests such as grubs. Additionally, they offer an economical and effort-free aeration of the soil with their constant tunneling. Others, however, prefer a mound free and tunnel free landscape and search out methods to eliminate these creatures.

Gophers tend to tunnel four to 18 inches below the ground. One gopher can create a tunnel that extends several hundred feet and covers an entire acre. Gophers create fan-shaped mounds, which may be 18 to 24 inches in diameter and about six inches high. Springtime is the most popular mound building time for gophers. Contrary to gophers, moles create superficial tunnels in your lawn. When surface runs are visible, a mole is typically involved. Moles may create small mounds of fresh soil but not nearly as significant as that of the gopher.

Because moles are territorial, typically only one to three are present in a large sized lawn at one time. A single mole can create significant damage over a large area in a

short amount of time. Unlike moles, gophers create colonies and may set up a residence with 10 to 20 gophers in a single lawn.

Because of these many differences between gophers and moles, elimination methods tend to differ somewhat as well. Control methods for pocket gophers include poisoning, trapping, flooding, gassing, encouraging natural enemies, and exclusion. Two of the most practical and common methods are using toxic baits or trapping. Grain baits, such as corn, oats, wheat, and grain sorghum are readily eaten by pocket gophers and can be found at local garden supply stores or at pest control operations. A probe is typically used to locate the main underground runway after which the poisoned bait is dropped into the burrow. The materials used for gopher poisoning can be dangerous for humans and pets. Extreme caution should be used when handling, storing, and applying these toxic substances. Labels should be read and followed closely.

Trapping is an additional method employed to eliminate pocket gophers. Small spring traps in varying sizes are available as are box traps with a choker loop. Two traps of appropriate size, each set in a different direction, are placed in the main runway. Trap-sets are then checked morning and evening.

Moles are also extremely challenging to control. Many repellent products are available but tend to be ineffective. Trapping and poisoning tend to be the most effective methods to eliminate moles. Poison gel worms that resemble plastic fishing worms are specifically designed and available to eliminate moles.

Moles create feeding tunnels, which they may visit only once, and travelling tunnels, which are frequented quite often. Identify an active travelling tunnel by collapsing several and then reexamining for additional activity a day or two later. Place either your traps or your poisonous bait in the tunnels identified as active. Again, use extreme caution and follow labels closely.

Whether choosing to ignore or eliminate these underground rodents, it is beneficial to know which type inhabits your yard. You can find additional information about controlling pocket gophers in the [Oklahoma State University Extension Service Fact Sheet NREM-9001](#) and about controlling moles in the [University of Arkansas Extension Fact Sheet FSA-9095](#).