

Augusta Chronicle
Garden Column
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The Army arrived in Augusta last week – marching across lawns, driveways, shrubbery, you name it. Not the men and women in the armed forces, but armyworms!

If you have a bermudagrass lawn or some variety of Bermuda pasture, you need to be on the lookout for them. We have probably gotten over a hundred calls or emails about them since last Friday.

If you have some other turfgrass, you probably should not be concerned, but in 1998, like this year, when they were really bad, they did eat a few zoysiagrass lawns. However armyworms were the worst they had been in 20 years that year so that is probably the only reason some zoysia was eaten. Armyworms should not eat annuals, perennials, trees or shrubbery in your landscape. I guess if they get hungry enough, they might eat a little, but they will not devastate the plants like they can bermudagrass.

People who live next to golf courses will find them in their grass regardless of the variety, marching toward the bermuda on the course. But again, they should not eat the other grasses.

The symptoms of armyworm damage are pretty straightforward. You have a green lawn one day and almost overnight the green grass blades are gone and your lawn looks brown. The armyworms leave brown stems after they are through eating. One lady in her email to me said the sod turned brown overnight and you could see the grass move.

In some years I have had homeowners call and say that they went out of town for the weekend. When they left on Friday the lawn looked fine, but when they returned on Sunday they no longer had a lawn. So it happens quickly.

One sign that armyworms are in the turf is birds clustered on your lawn. They like to eat them. But don't think the birds will take care of all of them.

Generally, the threshold level to treat is when you have five or more worms per square foot. If you suspect your turf is being infiltrated but can't find the caterpillars on the grass, use a soap flush to bring them to the surface. Fill a 2-gallon bucket with water and squirt some dishwashing liquid in (approximately 1/2-oz. dishwashing soap/gallon water).

Fall armyworms are the caterpillar stage of a non-descript, small gray moth that over-winters in Florida and the tropics. Each year storms bring the adult moths north. The females lay masses of up to 700 eggs on just about everything in sight. They could be on your shrubbery, your patio furniture, or anything else in the landscape.

The eggs are cream colored at first, but turn darker as the tiny caterpillars get ready to hatch. They are covered with gray fuzz from the female's body. Young armyworms are one quarter to three quarters of an inch long. Mature ones are one and a half inches. They are dark with several light stripes down the length of the body. The head or face has an inverted "Y" on it.

The first group of females lay eggs in South Georgia. Succeeding generations march up the state, traveling on weather fronts and storms. The caterpillars hatch from eggs in two to four days, depending on the temperature. Eggs develop to fully grown larvae in two to four weeks. The larvae burrow into the soil and form pupae. Moths emerge in 14 days.

If you have a Bermuda lawn, you might go ahead and treat it with an insecticide. Carbaryl (Sevin), trichlorfon (Dylox), imidacloprid (Merit), cyfluthrin (Bayer Advanced products), bifenthrin (Ortho Max) and other pyrethroids are the best insecticides to treat with. Bt. products (organic) like Thuricide and Dipel are effective but only on small (a half inch or smaller) worms. Follow labeled rates for your pesticide.

Irrigate before treating to move the caterpillars out the thatch layer of the grass. Treat lawns during early evening or as late in the day as possible when the worms are likely to be feeding. If possible mow the grass before you treat then don't mow for three days after the treatment.

Armyworms normally cannot over-winter in the middle state portions of Georgia. They may survive a mild winter in Florida and extreme South Georgia.

If your grass has already been eaten, you can take comfort in knowing that armyworms rarely, if ever, kill established grass. Bermuda is tough and it will come back. Newly sodded or sprigged grass could be severely damaged or even killed since it has not grown a root system.

It is hard to say how long the armyworms will be active in our area, but I would be on the lookout for them at least until the end of September or the first part of October.