

Armyworms Are Marching Across Barrow County, Again



In late summer, almost every year, armyworms attack pastures, hayfields, and turf areas in some part of Georgia. Extremely dry, hot weather is the welcome mat that invites army worms to our region. So with all the rain we have experienced this summer why do we have armyworms?

First off armyworms do not over winter in this part of the country. The fall armyworm overwinters in south Florida and the Caribbean. To understand the lifecycle: first you have an egg which hatches into 2nd stage, a caterpillar(worm), which turns into the 3rd stage called the pupae or pupae stage and then fourth stage is the adult moth emerging from the pupae case. As pupae hatch into moths in late spring they start heading north looking for green, lush areas to feed. There can be as many as 5 generations so if the first batch of moths do not reach north Georgia, the 2nd or 3rd generation can reach us. The adult moths are active at night laying eggs in bunches of 50 -100. Eggs hatch in 2 -3 days and the young caterpillars begin to feed. Feeding from young worms causes skeletonized leaves on grass blades but large worms will eat the entire leaf leaving a stalk. The caterpillars are most active early and late in the day. These caterpillars are 1.5 to 2 inches long when full grown, and the color varies from light tan to green to nearly black. A tan colored stripe runs down each side of the caterpillar and as they become about an inch long they develop an upside-down Y marking on their forehead. The caterpillars feed for 2 -3 weeks until they go into the soil and pupate. In about 10 -14 days adult moths emerge and start the egg laying process over again. The entire lifecycle last only 4 -5 weeks long.

Scattered reports across Barrow County had fall armyworms attacking hayfields back in early August 2009 when things were a little dry but certainly not a drought. As the rains arrived in early September our Bermuda and crabgrass became lush and succulent. This lush growth coincided with the 4 -5 weeks since our first outbreak of armyworms. If we have a warm October we can expect another outbreak between October 20 and 27, 2009.

Many farmers have heard that armyworm caterpillars drown in the rain so they will not pose a problem during wet periods. This is simply not true. Moths (adults) are not very successful laying eggs that hatch into caterpillars during wet periods. So we typically do not see explosive populations of armyworms during wet periods but the moisture produces lush growth which can attract the moths.

Luckily, grass is seldom killed by feeding damage. In a lawn, there is no big concern, because the grass will regrow in 2- 3 weeks. But for farmers the loss of 2 -3 weeks of grazing or a missed hay cutting could be very expensive in purchased feed to replace the lost grass. For homeowners, my suggestion is to do nothing in late September unless you have just planted fescue or ryegrass. If you are just compelled to kill the caterpillars try an organic alternative*Bacillus thuringiensis*. *Bacillus thuringiensis* is sold under the names "Dipel", "Safer Caterpillar Killer", "Green Light BT Worm Killer", "Caterpillar Attack", and others. This is actually

a naturally occurring soil bacterium that is deadly on most caterpillars but harmless to mammals and birds. It is also great on caterpillars in the vegetable garden. If you find an outbreak in your yard should you spray? Again, unless you have a newly established lawn, either by seed or sodding, the worms will probably not destroy your grass. However, worms that have been stepped on or driven over leave the most interesting colors on concrete.

Farmers have a little more at stake when it comes to the decision to spray or wait. There are a few insecticides labeled for use on armyworms in pastures/ hayfields. But in late September do you spray or just let the worms eat your grass? Larger worms are harder to control so in many haying situations, if the hay is almost ready to cut, the best option is to cut the hay instead of spraying. The worms will not eat grass in the bale or grass that is cut ready to bale. For hayfields that are not to be cut again in the fall, then let the worms eat the grass. For pastures the best idea is to congregate cattle on pastures with armyworm outbreaks to let the cows out compete the worms. Try to move cows to pastures with taller grass to stay ahead of the worms. Treating with an approved insecticide sometimes is the best solution, but can add to the costs of running your farm.

Feel free to call on the Barrow County Extension Office for help finding the best solution for your yard or farm.