

Armadillos: The Real Illegal Aliens

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I remember the first time I laid eyes on an armadillo. It was early summer in 1986 on a paved road just down from Alligator Point, Florida. I was accompanying my parents on a joy ride when we noticed a strange creature lying dead in the road. We actually pulled the car over and got out to look at it! They were just as strange to me then as they are now. Little did we know that within a few years they would be numbered like the stars and act as the bane of southern gardeners everywhere.

I think we have all had our frustrating moments with the “possum on the half shell”, as armadillos have been referred to. Yeah, they love to dig! Especially where you don’t want them to dig! It seems their favorite places are woods, gardens, flowerbeds and yards. Really the only places they don’t like to dig are cement and paved roads. However, they generally like sandy soils and shady places for protection from sunlight.

Armadillos are insect eaters for the most part. About 90 percent of their diet is made up of insects, insect larvae, spiders and earthworms. There is some evidence that says they will eat fruits and vegetables as well. In the summertime they usually spend most of their time in burrows and as the sun disappears they emerge and feed. However, they can be seen at any time during any season. During the winter months they are more likely to be out during the daylight hours.

I have found that one of the armadillo’s favorite meals is white grubs and mole crickets. In theory, the fact that they like to eat white grubs should give them a beneficial purpose. However, in reality what this really means is that they like to dig up your garden and yard in your favorite spots! Sometimes it may be beneficial to control the grubs to reduce the incidence of armadillo intrusions. To do this, grubs must be collected and identified before a treatment recommendation can be made. A square foot of turf can be cut and pulled back to count and collect the grubs. The grubs can be identified by the raster patterns on their tails or you can bring them into the Extension office to have them identified. We have a publication available online called “White Grub Pests in Turfgrass” that shows these patterns. Depending on the species you have, pesticides are available to treat them. Generally, you water the area that needs treatment, apply the pesticide and finally have it further watered in. This allows the chemical to penetrate into the root zone. The treatment is no different for mole crickets except they don’t need to be identified because all of the grub materials will work on them. Make sure the pesticide label says you are allowed to use the product in the garden before you do. Trying to exclude them from you garden is probably the best method for your garden.

If you can manage to reduce the cricket and grub populations then you may be able to give the armadillos a reason to go somewhere else. Otherwise, we are left with our usual means of removal which never seem to be affective enough. Armadillos can be trapped, excluded by electric fencing, shot or antagonized by a canine (I’ve been told that bulldogs will keep them on the run). Most of these methods are only temporary solutions to the problem. Be careful not to handle armadillos as well. Armadillos are the carriers of many nasty germs and diseases including leprosy! Ultimately, you will have the best luck by removing the reasons that brought them to you in the first place.