

Segment for Week of 12 April 2021

This is Julie Callahan bringing you information on Shore friendly living and gardening from the Eastern Shore Master Gardeners and Virginia Cooperative Extension.

One of the most frequent questions in pest management in Virginia lawns is “how do I control moles and voles?” Unfortunately, this remains a very difficult question to answer. For a better understanding of these pests, Dr. Jim Parkhurst, Wildlife Biologist in Virginia Tech’s Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation, was asked to comment.

Dr. Parkhurst shares the following: “When one is talking about a lot of disruption to their lawn, I suspect the individual really is describing their experience with moles and I doubt that voles are a primary concern. That’s not to say that voles may not be present, but their presence is not easily detected nor immediately obvious to the average homeowner, especially those complaining about or seeking help specifically with lawn problems. Mole conflicts are one of the more common and persistent problems we receive from suburban homeowners, but ones for which we also have few reliable approaches that will provide long-lasting relief. As it turns out, the more meticulous and doting one becomes with one’s lawn, the greater the likelihood of potentially creating an environment attractive to moles.

There seems to be a correlation between one’s efforts to cultivate a healthy lawn environment and the resulting attractiveness of those efforts to moles. Moles feed on insects and earthworms which are present in a healthy lawn. We recognize the value of having worms and crawlers, given the contributions they bring to good soil health (aeration, turn-over, organic matter incorporation, etc.), so we try to encourage their abundance and presence. Ultimately, though, we amplify the bounty of the cornucopia

we create and ramp up its attractiveness in the process. So, with moles, we have a 2-phased dilemma: their numbers can be high under both good and bad lawn conditions, but most of the standard approaches suggested for dealing with them direct mitigation efforts at only the “bad lawn” portion of a much larger problem. Eliminating the grubs and bad organisms will not eliminate moles from the picture where ample alternative resources for food also are present. At the same time, though, we do not want to encourage people to use extremely harsh chemicals capable of taking out the good critters in our lawn — we want worms and crawlers to promote a healthy system. So, what’s a person to do?

“Normally, we direct clients to our existing extension publication on this matter, [Managing Wildlife Damage: Moles](#), located within the VCE publication library. This document runs through our understanding of the mole, how it functions in the environment, and what it seeks, but then we also examine the options available for consideration when confronted with mole conflicts. As I alluded, there’s not a lot there that some people will find satisfying, but that’s the limits of what our research has demonstrated and what the law allows. Even if you are successful in reducing or eliminating a current situation with moles, there needs to be a realization that that state will be short-lived --- as long as food resources and unoccupied habitat remain in place, it soon will be filled by other transients seeking territory to occupy. Fossorial small mammals require constant and on-going attention — there’s no such thing as once-and-done treatment with any of them, so tending to potential lawn pests becomes a new full-time recreational hobby — that’s just the reality of the situation.

“In some cases, it may be worth a client’s effort to hire out a professional. People can find a list of those who perform such service (for fee) on the [Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries website](#), where they provide a database of nuisance wildlife control operators — simply enter the county of residence from the drop-down menu and

a list of all certified providers in that area (and a list of the species on which they work) will appear.

In terms of vole management, the situation is not a lot different. Voles (often called field mice or meadow mice) are herbivores so they are not interested in insects or earthworms and it is not likely they will be causing a lot of tunneling damage to your lawn... they are looking for the bulbs of your daffodils, hosta, iris, and tulips. Again, I cannot find any specific peer-reviewed data to provide a chemical control program recommendation, so the best bet remains physical trapping. After identifying the damage and a hole in the ground where the critter was located, I placed a peanut-butter baited trap and covered the area with a 5-gallon bucket -- to keep other animals from finding my trap — and I caught my primary culprit that was eating my irises.

Thanks to Dr. Parkhurst for such a thorough discussion.

For answers to Gardening questions and more, call your local Accomack or Northampton County Extension Office. Here on the Shore call either 678-7946 or 787-1361.

<https://ext.vt.edu/lawn-garden/turfandgardentips/tips/mole-vole.html>