

Gophers or Moles Destroying your Lawn?

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Many of us have experienced it, especially in the more rural areas. We wake up in the morning, look outside at our lawn, and there is a fresh mound of pulverized soil that wasn't there the day before. You clean it up, and the next morning you look out and it's back—along with one or two new mounds! As the frustration builds, you wonder what to do? What's causing it and how do you control it? Here in western Wisconsin, we're lucky (or unlucky) enough to have both pocket gophers and moles, both of which leave soil mounds in our lawns and fields. For whatever reason, perhaps our mild winters, there seem to be a large number of problems with gophers and moles this spring. One gopher or mole can do a lot of damage. It may look like your yard is infested with a large number of animals, when in reality it is only one!

First, you have to determine which critter is plaguing your lawn—pocket gopher or mole. If it's a mole, you will see raised tunnels in the lawn leading up to the soil mound. These are feeding tunnels, and dry weather causes the moles to tunnel at a deeper level to find food. If there are no raised tunnels, it's probably a pocket gopher. Which rodent you have will determine your method of attack.

Pocket gophers are vegetarians. They eat roots of plants. Moles, on the other hand, are mostly "meat eaters" and prefer to dine on grubs, worms, and insects. Both are active at night and do not want to be exposed to daylight. They form a series of tunnels, which they travel through each night. When they come to the surface, they create a mound of fresh soil.

While there are several poisonous baits on the market, they are not always effective because it is often difficult to get these critters to eat them! Therefore, the most effective way to remove a pesky gopher or mole from your yard is to trap it. Once you've determined if you have a mole or a gopher, you can purchase the appropriate type of trap.

Pocket gopher traps are to be set underground. Dig out around the soil mound until you find the hole leading to the tunnel. The tunnel can be 8 to 24 inches below the lawn surface. Set the trap and place it gently in the tunnel. Tie a string to the trap and attach it to a stake anchored on the lawn surface. This prevents the animal from taking the trap deep into the tunnel, and reminds you where you've set the trap. Then cover the hole with the loose soil, leaving a small portion open, so a ray of light goes into the tunnel. The gopher, who doesn't like daylight, will come to the surface to close up the hole and be trapped. Gophers are quite easy to trap in this way and it often takes just one or two nights to catch the culprit.

Moles, on the other hand, are more frustrating. They not only cause more damage to lawns with their raised tunnels, but they are more difficult to trap. If you have a severe mole problem, it might mean that you have a lot of grubs in your lawn, which are a food source for moles. Controlling the grubs may be the best way to control the moles. Mole traps are placed on the lawn surface, straddling a raised tunnel. When the mole next uses the tunnel, he vibrates the soil surface, which springs the trap sending a spike through the soil surface into the tunnel, hopefully catching the mole. However, moles are very sensitive to what's near their tunnel, and if they suspect something fishy, they will create a new tunnel around the trap! It may take more effort and time to catch a mole than it takes to catch a pocket gopher.

If you have problems with pocket gophers or moles damaging your lawn, keep in mind that they aren't intentionally trying to drive you crazy, they are just making a living the way moles and gophers do. Good luck!