

Moles are Very Frustrating!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

If you've ever walked across your lawn, garden, flower bed, just anywhere and felt spongy soil beneath your feet and noticed slightly raised tunnels, then you are familiar with the activity of moles. Unfortunately, spring, especially a spring with regular and routine rains, is peak mole activity time. They are busy right now trying to feed their young that were born in March and April. Having mole activity in your yard is very frustrating and I will tell you right up front that your options of dealing with them are very limited!

Moles are a native mammal of Kansas. Their food primarily consists of any living thing that they can find within the top few inches of the soil surface. This includes earthworms, white grubs, adult insects, spiders, snail larvae and occasionally small vertebrates. It very rarely includes plant material. Pocket gophers, also a native mammal, are herbivores and do eat plant roots and other plant parts. But moles very rarely eat vegetative material.

Moles have a very high metabolism rate which requires them to eat actively day and night at all times of the year. They do not hibernate. They may burrow deeper in cool weather and slow down but unlike some mammals, hibernation is not part of the plan. By some estimates, moles must eat half their weight or more every day, especially at this time of year when they are raising young.

Moles feed by "swimming" through the soil, close to the surface. When their sensitive nose touches something that moves, they bite it and eat it. This is an important point to remember. Many of these surface tunnels are used just one time but since they are very close to the soil surface they become very obvious and create the spongy soil I referred to earlier. These "one trip buffet lines" are often loops that connect back to permanent tunnels that are slightly deeper and often barely bubble up above the soil surface. These tunnels have to be excavated which is why we sometimes see little eruptions of soil where the mole has pushed soil up to the surface. These look quite different than the finely ground soil associated with pocket gopher mounds.

Now for the really frustrating part of dealing with moles. Our options are very limited in dealing with them. Noise makers, either mechanical or electronic are worthless. Repellents, whether they are placed in tunnels or sprayed on the surface lack any sort of evidence of working. Chewing gum in the tunnel? Nope, that doesn't work either. Poison baits are usually grain based and moles don't eat grain. Even those that are shaped like worms just lie there and don't respond when the mole touches it so they don't eat it. Some fumigants will work, but most are dangerous and are restricted to professional applicators.

You basically have three options. First, you just let them go, stomp down the tunnels to eliminate air pockets around plant roots that can cause issues, and hope that they eat up all the food and leave. Secondly, you use lawn insecticides to try to eliminate all their food sources. This may or may not cause them to leave. It also has the unfortunate effect of killing earthworms that are inherently good for the soil. Thirdly, you try to trap them. Trapping can work and there are several types of traps out there. But it takes patience and dedication. There are many things you need to keep in mind if you want to trap them and it's best if you pick up our 8 page bulletin on dealing with moles. As for me, I take the easy route and use method #1!