



Cornell University
Cooperative Extension
Columbia County

479 Rte. 66
Hudson, NY 12534-9704
tel. 518.828.3346
fax. 518.828.3069
www.cce.cornell.edu/columbia/columbia.html

Early Season Grub Management
By Joel Allen, Extension Educator

We are currently receiving many questions about lawn problems from gardeners throughout Columbia County. Most of these inquiries suspect grub damage to be the culprit, based on an observation of rather large areas of dead grass in their lawn. While this may be the result of grubs feeding on the roots of the grass, it most likely occurred last fall and NOT this spring.

Grubs, the larval stage of the Japanese beetle, European Chafer, and Asiatic Garden beetle (all scarab beetles), most commonly found in Columbia County lawns, golf courses, athletic fields, and the like, are the most likely critters to be responsible. However, these grubs have been deep in the ground since last fall and have only now begun to feed on grass roots. If they are currently present in your lawn, they will continue to feed till they develop into adults in June.

Before pursuing a grub-proofing effort, either by yourself or by someone you hire, Cornell Cooperative Extension recommends you first determine for yourself, whether you have grubs in your lawn and, if so, how serious a problem you have. Don't just assume you have grubs because you had them last year or a friend, neighbor, or garden center sales person told you so.

While we know moles and skunks feed on grubs and other small bugs and insects that live in the soil, their activity in the spring is not absolutely a guarantee you have grubs. These animals can cause a great deal of damage to the lawn just looking for grubs. If they find them, they'll continue to feed on them until they are gone. Of course, that is a good thing, but the damage they leave behind can be devastating. If they don't find any grubs in your lawn, the moles and skunks will eventually move on, but in their search for food, they still can cause a lot of damage to your turf. In addition, don't bother looking for grubs in the bare areas of your lawn where the grass is dead. You need to be searching for grubs where the live grass meets the dead grass. That's where their food supply is.

What to do with the large dead or bare areas of soil in your lawn? Consider raking out the dead grass and any moss that may be growing there and re-seed with a grass seed mixture appropriate for that specific growing condition: predominantly fescues for full sun, traffic areas or predominantly blue grasses for the shady, well-maintained lawns. Keep the new seeding watered lightly until it germinates. Then reduce your watering to maybe once a week if not provided by Mother Nature. Meantime, search for the possible grub population at the margins of where the green grass is growing. With a knife or shovel, cut a square of sod and roll back like a carpet. Look for the typical cream colored grubs curled up like a C just below the sod. Do this in several spots of the lawn. If you find more than 8 to 10 grubs per sample, then you may want to consider a grub-proofing effort. If you find fewer than that, your time and money might be better spent on just grass seed and fertilizer. We have learned that an otherwise healthy lawn can tolerate a certain degree of grub activity.

Grub populations at this time of year, are much more difficult to manage with grub-proofing products because the overwintering grubs are so large. Most lawn treatment products for grubs are recommended for late summer application when the new grubs are very hungry, but much smaller and easier to manage. However, some products are available for spring treatments or labeled multi-season. Be sure you read the label of any lawn grub-proofing product before purchasing to know when and how to apply it. Also be sure to compare price, active ingredient, area it will treat, and amount of application.

If you determine you have a serious grub problem in your lawn, you may decide you would like to undertake a treatment (grub proofing) method. This grub proofing may reduce greatly the damage to your turf from all the beetle grubs mentioned and the later damage generally caused by the adult Japanese beetles. I must add, however, that even though you may be successful in eliminating the grubs in your lawn, you may still experience adult beetles coming in from neighboring yards or fields where no grub proofing has taken place. Consider traps for the adults (located on the perimeter of your property).

Gardening questions can be addressed to the Master Gardener volunteers of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Columbia County, 479 Route 66, Hudson, NY 12534, by phone at (518) 828-3346 or via email at columbia@cornell.edu.

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