

Master Gardener: Moles, gophers are common landscape pests

By Brian Jervis, May 14, 2016, Tulsa, USA

Something is tearing up my yard. I can't tell if it's moles or gophers. What should I do? M.S., Tulsa

Moles and gophers are recognized pests in the landscape and can cause significant damage but in different ways. Likewise, the suggestions for control of the two are similar but different.

Moles are insectivores and only eat insects, mainly earthworms, while gophers are rodents and eat plant roots. Moles do not eat plant roots.

Moles have superficial tunnels easily seen, and they rarely make dirt mounds. Gophers also have tunnels but are too deep to be seen. They excavate mounds of dirt, usually a foot or more in diameter typically kidney shaped with a small depression on the flat side. This depression is usually over the end of a deep side tunnel.

So if you can see tunnels, you have moles. If you have several large fan-shaped fresh dirt mounds, you have gophers.

Best control of the two pests is by traps and poison baits, but the types of traps and baits are different for each.

For helpful information about mole control, look online for the University of Arkansas fact sheet "Controlling the Eastern Mole." For gopher control advice, obtain OSU fact sheet "Controlling Pocket Gophers." Both have useful discussions about the behaviors of both pests, which types of traps and baits to use and how to use them.

For successful trapping or baiting of moles, one must identify an active tunnel. The visible tunnels in the lawn are usually made by only 2-3 moles. Most of the tunnels are feeding tunnels used only one time. To identify a frequently used traveling tunnel, poke a broomstick-sized hole in the tunnel or compress a section and check back in 1-2 days to see if it is repaired. If so, that is the tunnel that should be used for a trap or poison bait.

Several types of useful mole traps are set above ground over the tunnels. These traps are effective if used according to directions and used with patience and persistence.

Garden centers and hardware stores have a variety of products for mole control, but studies have shown that, other than traps, the best control is with a poison gel worm such as Tomcat Mole Killer and several other brands. These are placed in one of the previously identified active tunnels.

While mole traps are set on top of the ground, to set gopher traps one must dig down to the tunnel, which may be at a depth of a foot or more. Usually two traps at a time are set, one at each end of the excavated tunnel.

Poison baits for gophers are usually in the form of grain and are poured through a pipe into a gopher tunnel. Tunnels are identified for bait application without digging, by probing into the soil adjacent to the mounds.

All these traps and poisons have their hazards and risks to children, pets and other animals. Read the above references and then follow the labeled directions of all products.