

The Green Thumb

Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

May 2009

Pests That Are Good for the Lawn

David Robson, horticulture educator

Each spring, we get aggravated by numerous small mounds of soil that make the lawn unpleasant to walk on and lumpy to mow. The culprits could be earthworms, cicada killer wasps, green False June beetles, or crayfish.

Earthworm activity is typically observed in the spring and fall as worms migrate to the soil surface. Night crawlers emerge to mate and pull decaying organic matter into the soil. Holes are about 1/2 inch in diameter, with soil piled around the hole.

Although your first reaction may be to declare all out warfare and total eradication, earthworms are beneficial to the lawn. They even perform a service that many people pay for—aerification. Their tunnels aerate the soil as the worms feed on thatch. Several research reports have shown virtually no thatch in plots with earthworms. Plots treated with insecticides had considerable thatch build-up over the years.

Fortunately, earthworms are only a problem in early spring. Once warm weather arrives, they burrow deeper in the soil and cease to produce surface mounds.

A second pest that can leave holes in the lawn is a cicada killer wasp. These large black and yellow wasps dig holes during the summer to bury annual cicadas that have been paralyzed by their sting. Activity usually shows up during late July and August.

With yellow stripes on their bodies, these creatures look like giant bees. They may swarm over an area but are not aggressive unless provoked. Cicada killers are beneficial insects, and control is not recommended.

False June beetles are large, 3/4-inch long, velvety-green beetles. They emerge from the soil in July. Presently, the immature form resembles any other white grub (except they have the habit of crawling on their back). They live in burrows in soil with a great deal of surface-decaying organic matter. False June beetles, like cicada killers, are beneficial and should not be controlled. Japanese beetles and masked chafers (June bugs), on the other hand, do cause problems.

The False June beetles in the grub stage will emerge to the surface at night and crawl in the turfgrass. This burrowing activity can produce mounds of soil 2 to 4 inches in diameter. Vertical burrows beneath the mounds can be 6 to 12 inches deep. Green June beetle larvae feed primarily on decaying organic matter and can dry out soil areas with their burrowing. They are commonly found in inactive compost piles.

Crayfish are sometimes a problem in wet areas. An exit hole with mud piled about it will be obvious. Soil mounds can be broken up with a stiff garden rake or a vertical mowing machine used to dethatch lawns.

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Tips for Edging Flower Beds

Tony Bratsch, horticulture educator



One of the challenges in taking care of flower beds is maintaining an attractive edge that transitions well with surrounding turf areas. Flower beds typically have loose, fertile soils, with exposed, bare edges. Spreading grass can creep in, and so do weeds which colonize these bare areas.

The method and frequency of edging to maintain beds is related to the type of grass in the lawn. Tall fescue and perennial ryegrass are bunch grasses that do not spread rapidly and are easy to control. Bluegrass spreads with short underground rhizomes that can encroach and root in flower beds. It tends to spread most in the cool weather of spring and late fall when it grows the fastest, so only one or two edging operations per season may be needed.

The most difficult edging challenge is with lawns that contain the rapidly spreading warm-season grasses—zoysia grass and bermuda grass. Both spread by means of rhizomes and above-ground stolons that form the dense turf. Zoysia grass is the slower spreading of the two, while Bermuda grass can move quite rapidly and may need multiple control operations during the heat of the summer.

Managing bed edges can involve one or a combination of several approaches. These methods include mechanical control, physical barriers, and chemical control.

Mechanical control involves using a broad-bladed spade, hoe, edging knife, or perhaps a power edger or weed eater to cut out turfgrass and weeds that establish on the edge of the bed. Hand-pulling is also an effective mechanical approach. Mechanical edging provides a manicured appearance and eliminates risk of using chemicals, but it is time consuming. Mechanical edging may need to be done several times through the season. Mulching beds creates a limited barrier to prevent weed establishment and, more importantly, makes it easier to pull them when they do get a foothold.

If the lawn consists of invasive grasses and mechanical edging becomes difficult, physical barriers may be a good option. Although mulch can be considered a physical barrier, weed seeds blowing in can germinate in degraded mulch.

Structural edging can be made from wood, plastic, metal, concrete, or other items. Selection depends on availability, cost, and personal preference. Continuous edging with few breaks will limit the sites where grass can creep through. Edging set 6 or more inches deep will be much more effective in blocking the intrusion of warm-season grass rhizomes. More shallow edging is adequate when clump grasses form the lawn. If materials such as brick or stone are used, a footing should be formed beneath, and mortar used between to make the edging continuous, stable, and sufficiently deep. If the edging is not tall enough, warm-season grasses can run over the top with their stolon growth.

The third option is chemical edging. This method involves the use of a non-selective herbicide such as glyphosate (Roundup™). Non-selective herbicides are easy to use but will kill desirable vegetation as well. They must be carefully sprayed along the bed edge. Spraying is best done on a still morning or evening, using a coarse spray setting that limits drift on desirable plants or grass. Chemical control works well in combination with physical barriers to keep installed edging neat and clean. Pre-emergent herbicides such as Preen™ can help prevent weeds from sprouting in perennial and annual beds. However, these herbicides will also affect newly seeded annuals as well as weeds, and these products will not stop spreading grasses.

Keeping beds tidy through the growing season is one of the many challenges in the landscape. By using one or a combination of mechanical methods, physical barriers, and chemical control, you can effectively manage those encroaching grasses.

Question Corner

Answer provided by Martha Smith, horticulture educator

Q. What kinds of vegetables can be grown in containers? I don't have time to take care of a large garden.

A. With few exceptions, just about anything that's grown in the traditional garden can be grown in a container. You simply have to work with the site conditions and provide the basic requirements of sunlight, water, and fertilizer.

Start by looking at the location for your containers. Vegetables are full-sun plants. Does your patio or deck face a sunny direction? Watering is the major task. Is there a hose handy, or will you have to haul water from the kitchen sink?

Vegetable containers don't have to be huge. Salad greens, pepper plants, radishes, and onions all do well in a shallow container. One that is 8 to 15 inches deep works for most vegetables and herbs.

The advantage of a larger container is that it will not dry out as quickly as a smaller, shallow container. A larger container not only has more surface area to plant, but it will also be deeper and will hold moisture longer. Some vegetables need deep soil. Tomatoes benefit from deeper rooting space. The only definite container rule is that it must have drainage holes.

Any good-quality potting soil is fine. Don't use straight garden soil because it will be too heavy. You may need to move your container, and the added weight of heavy soil can be cumbersome.

Care of your container garden is basically the same as an in-ground garden except watering demands are higher. As the summer heats up and the roots are filling the container, the soil will quickly dry out. From July through September, you will probably have to water every day.

Since you water more, fertilizers flush out as the excess water drains. As a result, you

will need to fertilize through the growing season. Select a potting soil with added fertilizer or incorporate slow-release fertilizers when planting. Both are released over time, slowly dissolving with each watering. Read and follow all label instructions. This may not be enough to get you through the season so you can supplement with a liquid fertilizer.

Also, monitor for pests. Pest control is easier with containers since they are raised off the ground and are close by for daily inspection. If you see a pest, you can prune off the infested portion or knock the insects off with a stream of water. If needed, choose and apply an appropriate pesticide as a direct treatment.

Now for the fun part...what to grow. Seed catalogues are full of tempting choices. Plant what you like and what you can't readily purchase locally. Try the unusual or gourmet varieties that, when available, are often expensive. Consider the bush-style sugar snap peas, salad green mixes, Swiss chard, beets—the possibilities go on and on.

The only plants you should avoid are the large vine crops such as traditional watermelons, pumpkins, and winter squash. In addition, corn and cabbage can also be too large for containers. Select smaller varieties that don't need the space.

A succession of crops works well for container gardening.

Cool spring temperatures are great for onions, potatoes, spinach, or chives. With warmer temperatures, rogue out what has been harvested and plant peppers, tomatoes, eggplants, or green beans.

In the fall, you can plant yellow beets, leeks, radishes, or Swiss chard. For color and accent, you can tuck in herbs such as parsley, purple-leafed basil, tri-color sage, or yellow-leafed thyme.



Send your lawn and garden questions to:

The Green Thumb
c/o Annette Campbell
U of I Extension
1212 Route 14 West
Benton, IL 62812

E-mail:
mdcampbe@illinois.edu

Add Color with Hiemalis Begonia

Ed Billingsley, guest columnist



The Hiemalis begonia, also known as Rieger begonia, is a cross between a tuberous and a wax begonia.

This plant grows 12 to 18 inches tall and will get 10 to 12 inches wide. You can use the plant in baskets, pots, or beds.

Its season-long flowering takes the garden display to a higher level. Plus, the leaves of this colorful plant are waxy, glossy, and attractive.

The Rieger is easy to care for. It will grow in filtered sunlight to partial shade. In partial shade, it will require less water and fertilizer. This plant will tolerate slightly dry conditions, but it doesn't do well in wet conditions—so, avoid overwatering.

Give the plant a dose of liquid fertilizer once a month. A water-soluble fertilizer

such as 15-30-15 works great. Trim off long stems to help keep the plant compact and reduce the leggy look. Remove spent flowers for increased bloom.

The Hiemalis begonia should have few problems with diseases or insects. Keep the leaves dry while watering to reduce the threat of powdery mildew.

Late in the season as winter approaches, bring the plant indoors because begonia does not tolerate frost. As the plant begins to fade, stop watering for a couple of weeks. Prune back to three to five nodes and then water the plant. New sprouts should start to show at the base. Before long, the plant is in full bloom again.

This annual flowering plant will make any garden corner amazingly bright, so add some Rieger begonias this year.



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