

Mystery of Moth Sightings in Lawns...Tropical Sod Webworms

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



September 28, 2016



Dr. William Johnson is a horticulturist with the Galveston County Office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Visit his website at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>.

News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.



PHOTOS BY **William M. Johnson**

I received a surprising number of e-mails and phone calls over the past week regarding the sudden appearance of small moths in lawns and nearby shrubs.

The most generic e-mail inquiry simply asked "Why do I have a lot of moths on my bushes and in my yard?" When I contacted the exasperated homeowner, he conveyed a description that other concerned homeowners also expressed including having large areas of tan to brown-colored grass which seem to continue to expand and enlarge. In most cases, these areas were reported to have changed almost overnight or over a very short period of time.

Not so coincidentally, I was able to tour several home landscapes last Saturday that were on the League City Garden Club's Annual Garden Walk. I must admit that I was as interested in touring the home landscapes as I was in determining if any of the lawns had sustained damage from tropical sod webworms. I think the tour guide at the first site was a bit disappointed with my interest in looking first at the lawn instead of the beautiful landscape and the striking palette of colorful flowers that framed the landscape upon entering the backyard.



I would not have been surprised if the tour guide had surmised that I might merit additional scrutiny given my focus. I initially focused on one large circular area of the lawn that was noticeably brown in color and missing blades of lawn grass.

Determining a definitive cause for the missing lawn grass required additional inspection. To get a closer look at the damaged area, I parted the St. Augustine grass similar to how a person might part their hair. It did not require much time before I found my first tropical sod webworm caterpillar (*Herpetogramma phaeopteralis*). Then I found several more caterpillars of varying sizes in short order.

Now it was picture taking time to document my finding. The tour guide was very friendly and accommodating but I think she was understandably perplexed at my horticultural investigation.

Then it was on to the next home. The lawn did not appear to sustain any damage from tropical sod webworm caterpillars feeding. But when I returned to my vehicle, I made a visual survey of neighboring lawns and quickly identified two nearby lawns that appeared to have tropical sod webworm damage (Fig. 1). An up-close inspection of the two lawns revealed tropical sod webworm damage.



Figure 1

I would not expect every lawn in the county to suffer damage from tropical sod webworms but based on the phone calls and e-mails to my office and my on-site inspections, homeowners should be on the alert for visual signals of tropical sod webworm damage.

Signs of tropical sod webworm damage



Figure 2

Sorting out turf damage takes some kneeling (this may look suspicious, especially if done while on a home tour). Damage begins in small patches of short-clipped grass, about 1 to 3 inches in diameter. The grass may look ragged, as if someone randomly used a weed-eater here and there (Fig. 2), and irregularly-shaped, larger brown patches may form if there is severe defoliation.

Injured grass blades initially appear notched and ragged as the outer edges of grass blades are eaten first with entire leaf blades being consumed in time. Injured turf is usually spotty within a lawn but damaged areas enlarge as caterpillars migrate in search of more food.

The damage looks unusual and shocks most homeowners because it appears to happen overnight. A lawn may have a few chewed up circular areas or browned out areas that are several feet in diameter. At first glance, homeowners might believe it is a fungal disease problem.

When high populations of tropical webworm caterpillars are present, examination of sod will likely reveal copious amounts of green pellets of frass (an entomological term meaning “fecal pellets” or insect poop !). The frass (Fig. 3) is loosely bound by strands of silk produced by caterpillars.



Figure 3

One thing you will find is that just looking carefully through the grass during midday may not turn up any webworms. However, if you make up a solution of soapy water (one tablespoon of dishwashing liquid per one gallon of water) and pour it in a transition area (where damaged or browned turf area transitions to healthy, green turf), the tropical sod webworms will start moving upwards, making them easier to spot as they move out of the sod and thatch.



Figure 4

Tropical sod webworm life cycle

The immature caterpillar stage of the tropical sod webworm can grow up to a half-inch in length (Fig. 4). Caterpillars have translucent green coloration and will have rows of dark spots along their back. The head section is dark, yellowish-brown in color.

The adults are frequently seen darting across the lawn, especially when disturbed. One homeowner reported seeing small clouds of moths appearing as he was mowing his lawn during the evening.

How to control tropical sod webworms

The good news is that control is possible. Tropical sod webworms are readily controlled by several types of liquid insecticides approved for turfgrass use. Synthetic insecticides labeled for use include but are not limited to: bifenthrin (such as Ortho's Bug B Gon Insect Killer For Lawns), Sevin, and permethrin. Since these are caterpillars, organic controls such as spinosad and *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) insecticides, can be effective although synthetic insecticides will have quicker results. Repeat applications are required to control next generation larvae.

I look forward to touring home landscapes on “A Garden Walk” in League City (Fig. 5) again next year. I hope my attention will not be distracted by tropical sod webworms or some other new insect pest outbreak.



Figure 5