



If it weren't for our country's love affair with the lawn, conflicts between people and moles would almost never happen.

For reasons buried deep in our psyches, Americans have long demanded landscapes dominated by open expanses of fastidiously tended greenery, requiring excessive trimming, water, and chemicals to maintain. Literally billions of dollars are spent every year to manicure nature to such perfection.

One animal who does tolerate—and perhaps even benefit from—the lawns people create is the mole. Moles impact lawns by tunneling, pushing up mounds of earth and (occasionally and then only temporarily) undermining the root systems of growing plants. Suffice it to say that the damage caused by moles is almost entirely cosmetic. On the other hand, moles provide benefits by turning soil, mixing soil nutrients, and improving soil aeration.

The Dirt on Moles

Although often mistaken for rodents, moles are actually members of the taxonomic order Insectivora, which includes shrews and bats. Unlike rodents, moles have naked snouts, eyes often hidden in fur, no external ears, and distinctive paddle-shaped forelegs that clearly distinguish them. Moles are also insectivores, with a dietary preference for worms, grubs, and other insects found underground. Seven species occur in North America, with eastern (*Scalopus aquaticus*) and star-nosed (*Condylura cristata*) moles the most widely distributed. Moles are not found throughout most of the Great Plains, Great Basin, and Rocky Mountain areas of the West.

Moles are fossorial, meaning that they spend most of their lives underground. They prefer moist, loose soils of the sort favored by their main source of food—grubs and earthworms. Not all mole tunneling leads to plant damage—even when evidence would seem to suggest it. Some plant damage may be caused by rodents (mice and voles) who use the moles' tunnels.

Holey Moley

Moles, in fact, are often blamed for damage caused by other species. The evidence of moles in your yard is easy to detect—sometimes as easy as tripping over one of their excavations, whether a small mound of earth that results from deep tunneling (molehills) or a shallow surface run or tunnel that collapses underfoot. Damage to lawns can occur when the raised turf over the surface tunnels is hit by mower blades—but only when the lawn is being clipped very short. Or it can occur when you simply step on a shallow run and create a hole in your lawn.

Getting Rid of Moles

Moles don't eat plants, but sometimes tunnel around the roots so thoroughly that the plant dries out and wilts. Other than that occasional damage, they are only a problem because of their runs. Runs are especially disfiguring to lawns.

Although moles are attracted to grubs in lawns, they also feed on other insects and earthworms. Getting rid of the grubs is a beginning to ridding your garden of a mole, but will probably not be enough to make him leave.

The most effective way to get rid of moles is to trap them. Several different kinds of traps are available in garden centers, and they all work. The harpoon traps are probably the easiest to use.

Step on some runs, then check back a couple of hours later or the next day to see which are pushed back up. These are the runs the mole is using. Stomp that one down again and set the trap over it. When the mole comes through, he triggers the trap. Then you have to empty it. Hire a neighbor kid for that part.

If you don't catch the mole in a couple of days, move the trap. Just keep trying, and you'll get him eventually. Moles are solitary, so when you get one, you've solved your problem. Unfortunately, moles often move into old mole runs, so it may not stay solved very long.

Poisons work sometimes, but you don't know for sure if you've killed the mole. When you trap a mole, you know you have him. There are a million other remedies for moles, and you're free to try as many as you wish. Somebody swears by each of them, so probably they each work sometimes or somewhere.