

Get Ready for Moles and Gophers

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

The scourge of many homeowners, or at least their lawns, will soon be on us. Okay, let me correct that, it's likely already happening! Moles and gophers are two fairly common subterranean pests of turf and natural areas everywhere. Although they both spent 99.9% of their time below the soil surface, and most of their time as somewhat solitary creatures, that's about where their similarities end.

Pocket gophers are true rodents, with long incisor teeth designed to chew off vegetation. They primarily eat roots and other vegetation that they can access underground. They will rarely go above ground to gather vegetation or plant parts (or find a gopher of the opposite sex to mate with) but soon get back underground where they can close off their tunnel and again feel safe. They are easily distinguished by piles of fresh dirt, looking like very finely ground up soil, pushed up from below in a somewhat straight line. They are particularly fond of plants with taproots like dandelions and alfalfa.

Moles are not rodents: they are insectivores. They consume very little plant material, instead going after anything they find in the soil like grubs, earthworms, literally anything that is alive and responds by moving as they swim through the soil just under the surface. While moles will occasionally leave piles of dirt on the surface, usually not looking like piles of finely ground up dirt, they are more likely detected by low ridges of soil pushed up that sink down when you step on them. You may find them especially right along the edge of a sidewalk or driveway. Moles are more likely to kill ornamental plants not because they eat the roots off, but because they create air pockets around the roots and the roots die.

Gophers will excavate around roots that they find tasty and literally eat them from the bottom up. Plants sometimes die but more often than not, as long as there is adequate soil moisture, the plant survive and regenerate roots. Moles swim through the surface digging with their powerful front feet, with their very sensitive nose in the lead. When their nose touches something that moves, like an insect, they immediately clamp on to it with their teeth. Poison baits are usually grain based. If you get them into the tunnels of both creatures, they will usually work IF they eat them. Gophers frequently will because the baits are grain based. Moles won't, because it doesn't move when their nose touches it.

Both of these critters are native in the tall grass ecosystem. If your yard is next to a prairie or woodland, you will likely always be dealing with one or the other, at least on periphery of your yard. Out at the farm where I live, I just tolerate them. You can effectively trap both species, with different styles of traps. If you are interested in trying to trap them, pick up our Extension bulletins on each species.

Some homeowners will attempt to control food sources (taproot plants for gophers or insects with moles). While that can sometimes help, there can be a lot of collateral damage to species we don't want to harm. Or, you could be between two other homeowners who choose to do nothing and your yard becomes the highway as the critters go back and forth. What I don't want you to do is to waste money on noise makers and all sorts of other gimmicks (castor oil, chewing gum, electronic noise makers, etc.) Virtually all of these have been effectively shown to simply not work.