

Post Rock Answers

By Cassie Homan September 24, 2021

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Fall Armyworm Invasion

Kansas and much of the Midwest has seen a surplus of armyworms this fall. The worms love the lush green grass of cool season lawns. They can leave a trail of destruction on lawns, landscape plants, and crop fields. The name armyworm originates from agriculture, where infestations sometimes resemble an army as they move across large crop fields. The same devastation can occur in turf, where armyworms can consume areas as large as a football field in as few as 2 to 3 days. Thankfully they migrate south for the winter and will soon be gone.

Armyworms and cutworms are the caterpillars of several species of night-flying moths. Adult moths are generally gray, with a 1½-inch wingspan and white underwings. True armyworms are plump, sparsely-haired, generally green to brown larvae, with dark stripes running down the sides and back. Their most distinguishing characteristic is a whitish inverted Y between the eyes. These caterpillars feed on the aboveground plant parts of many grasses and are a pest of numerous garden and field crops.

Armyworm caterpillars pass through six instar stages (life stages) with their size and appetite increasing with each molt. The earliest instars, one to four, eat relatively little leaf material, while the fifth and sixth larval stages eat over 90 percent of the total foliage the armyworm will consume over its lifespan. This usually means that early damage is often overlooked, and most defoliation takes place over a relatively short period during the later development stages. That is why the caterpillar damage seemed to appear “overnight.” The caterpillars had been with us for some time, but they hadn’t produced noticeable damage until the final instar stages.

Armyworms feed on grass blades and cut plants off near the soil surface. Grasses appear ragged and may turn brown from the feeding. Damage is more likely to occur if the lawn borders cropland or large untended fields. Armyworms, in particular, seem to be attracted to areas of lush vegetation. Caterpillars feed throughout the day but are typically most active early in the morning and late in the evening. They can often be observed easily at these times. If armyworms are suspected, check the damaged areas a couple of hours after dark. Depending on the species involved, larvae may be feeding up on the plant foliage or down near the crown of the plant. Damage near the crown should be considered much more serious than simple foliar feeding.

While scouting for damage is important for all insects, careful, frequent inspection is especially important for this pest because it feeds rapidly and is very destructive. Active ingredients (and products thereof) registered for the control of armyworms and /or cutworms include: acephate (Acephate, Bonide Systemic Insect Control); *Bacillus thuringiensis* var. *kurstaki* (Dipel, Thuricide); bifenthrin (Talstar, Bonide Eight Flower & Vegetable Granules, Hi-Yield Bug Blaster Bifenthrin, Ortho Home Defense Insect Killer for Lawn & Landscape); carbaryl (various carbaryl and some Sevin products); cyfluthrin (Tempo, BioAdvanced Vegetable & Garden Insect Spray); fluvalinate (Mavrik); fonofos (Crusade); lambda-cyhalothrin (Scimitar, Bonide Garden & Home RTU, Spectracide Triazicide); and trichlorfon (Dylox, BioAdvanced 24 Hour Grub Control, Proxol).

K-State Research and Extension has a variety of resources for all your gardening and landscaping needs this fall. Stop by or give us a call with your questions.

Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Cassie may be contacted at choman@ksu.edu or by calling Beloit (785-738-3597).