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Fall Armyworms in the Lawn

Lately one of the most common questions I receive is about fall armyworms. If you are not familiar with them, they are caterpillars that feed primarily on grasses, corn, and sorghum, although they can attack other plants too. This means they can cause severe damage to lawns. Young worms are $\frac{1}{2}$ - to $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch long, while older armyworms are around 1.5 inches long. The color can vary but is usually dark brown with a light stripe down both sides of their body. There is also an upside-down Y on the top of their head between their eyes. After they pupate, they turn into brown moths, about 1 inch long.

Fall armyworms cannot actually survive our Kansas winters. In most states they die off in the winter, only surviving in Florida and southern Texas (and countries to the south). When our weather gets warmer in the spring, the moths start to move north out of these areas, laying eggs and creating more caterpillars that will feast on our lawns and crops. It takes about 25 days per generation, so Kansas usually sees 2-4 generations of fall armyworms depending on our weather patterns. This might not seem like much, but a female fall armyworm can lay up to 1000 eggs, meaning the populations grow quickly.

Fall armyworms do not usually kill grass but go for new tender blades of grass. You may notice patches of grass withering and browning as they feed. If there is a large population, they can cause brown areas to appear in your lawn within a day. A large population may also mean they run out of food and may start to eat down near the base of the plant where the grass is tougher. However, they tend to move on to new areas of a lawn rather than eat a plant down to the base. This means that grass will likely regrow, especially if it gets rain or irrigation to help encourage a flush of new growth.

If you have a bad infestation of fall armyworms, you may consider using an insecticide on your lawn to kill them. Options include cyhalothrin (Spectracide Triazicide), permethrin (38 Plus Turf, Termite & Ornamental Insect Spray; Hi-Yield Garden & Farm Insect Control; Eight Yard & Garden RTS) and Spinosad (Conserve, Monterey Garden Insect Spray, Captain Jack's Dead Bug Brew, Natural Guard Spinosad) and Dylox (BioAdvanced 24-Hour Grub Control) are commonly available materials registered for control of fall armyworm in turf. Spray treatments have greater and quicker contact efficacy than granular applications. Granular treatments require irrigation or rain to activate the insecticide from the dry granular carrier. Professional lawn care service personnel have access to additional materials (such as Scimitar and Deltamethrin) which may have more persistence than homeowner products.