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PHOTO BY BONNIE COURTER

(Left) Moles produce a large, volcano-shaped mound. (Center) Pocket gophers are more destructive than moles, favoring bulbs and roots and even whole plants. (Right) Gopher mounds are flat on top, fan-shaped, with the hole off to one side.

ASK A MASTER GARDENER

GOPHERS and MOLES

Question: I've noticed with the return of the rains, that my lawn and garden are being invaded by some kind of tunneling critter, leaving big mounds of unsightly dirt everywhere. How can I get rid of these dastardly diggers?

Answer: Looks like you're seeing an invasion of moles or pocket gophers. Though they've been present all along, with the return of the rainy season, which softens up the soil, they appear to be more active and noticeable.

First of all, it's important to know which animal you have so you can deal with it successfully.

Moles are in the mammalian order Insectivora or insect eaters. They eat primarily worms, insects, grubs and other invertebrates. By aerating the soil with their tunneling, they play a beneficial role by mixing in needed nutrients to the soil and breaking it up for better plant root growth.

However their tunneling can damage plants when their runways create paths around roots – plus the mounds create

a headache for homeowners trying to mow their lawns.

Occasionally, though, moles will munch on tender bulbs and root vegetables as well.

Moles breed once a year in late winter, early spring with an average litter of three to five young. Moles live about three years and are rarely seen, staying underground mostly as they are essentially blind. They have large, long-nailed front digging paws that easily excavate through the soil.

Pocket gophers, on the other hand, are much more destructive, favoring bulbs and roots and even whole plants. I've witnessed a gopher in my garlic and onion patches actually pull the whole plant down into its tunnel!

These rodents are very territorial like moles, and tend to be anti-social except during spring mating season. They can produce one to two litters a season, each litter consisting of three to six young, from March to June.

If planning a garden of raised beds, gophers and moles can be kept out by first attaching a barrier of welded wire (hardware cloth) on the bottom.

To determine if you have a gopher or mole, take a look at the



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Master Gardener

mounds you have. Moles produce a large, volcano-shaped mound. Gopher mounds are flatter on top, fan-shaped, with the hole off to one side which is sometimes plugged.

The best way to control either of these critters is by trapping. There are all kinds of crazy homegrown methods like filling the tunnels with car exhaust, peppermint, gadgets that give off sonar vibrations, and chewing gum, but they're not proven to consistently work.

Using baits is an option, but they can be lethal to your pets or if the bait is eaten by a predator, can be harmful to other animals or birds in their food chain.

Mole traps are scissor-jawed such as the "Out 'O Sight" by Victor, while gopher traps are two-pronged pinchers, like my favorite – Macabee "Old Reliable".

In order to figure out where to set the traps, first knock down the mounds. The next day, if you see fresh mounds, you know the mole or gopher is actively using that tunnel. With a probe or iron rod (I use a long screwdriver), push it down between two mounds.

Keep probing until it goes down easily, indicating you've found the tunnel. With a shovel, dig out a rectangular plug of soil at least 6-8" deep and remove it, exposing the tunnel.

Be sure to wear gloves so you don't leave any human scent. Using a small trowel, gently clear out each entrance of the tunnel.

Now if using the mole trap, make a small mound in the center, set the trap carefully, following the directions on the box, and set it over the mound. When the mole tunnels through, it should go through the scissors and depress the trigger pan, releasing the trap and killing the mole.

Generally for gophers, you will use two traps, especially when using the Macabee model. Find the tunnel as described above, clean out each end of the tunnel you exposed, set the traps and position each one as deep into the tunnel as you

can, keeping your finger on the trip pans.

Be sure and have a small chain connecting the trap to a stake that is secured outside of the hole so the gopher doesn't drag your trap down the hole with it. Then cover the hole you made with a piece of plywood or the plug of soil so no light penetrates.

Be sure and check your traps every day. If you caught your prey, deposit their body back down the tunnel to repel any other gophers or moles. If the traps are tripped, re-set them. Move the traps every 3 days if there's no action in them.

If you're not the squeamish type, trapping can be kind of fun. Along with the challenge and anticipation of the hunt, I always get a thrill when I finally snag the little varmint.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.



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