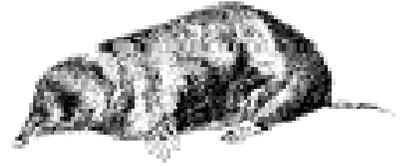


Moles and voles

SPRING IS OFFICIALLY JUST WEEKS AWAY, which means that very soon we'll be able to get a glimpse of our lawns and see how they've survived the winter. Chances are there will be at least a few areas of your lawn that look as if they've been worked over by tiny bulldozers. The culprits, of course, are a pair of pests known as moles and voles.



These two critters have similar names, and even look similar at a quick glance (that's a mole on the right), but they really are quite different. Knowing something about them—what they eat and where they live—may help you control these furry little pests.

Moles have large, paddle-shaped front feet designed for digging their characteristic tunnels. They can dig with a force of 32 times their body weight, and dig surface tunnels at a rate of 18 feet per hour. They make surface tunnels for feeding, and deeper tunnels to unite the feeding tunnels. These deeper tunnels have those characteristic mounds of soil at the end—a sure sign you have moles instead of voles.

It is not true that moles eat plants, although they may inadvertently kill a plant by tunneling through its roots. What moles are digging for is food—especially grubs, and earthworms. By eating insects, moles can be helping to prevent insect outbreaks, and it's certainly some consolation to know they're feasting on grubs. You can try to control moles by using pesticides to control the grubs. The downside, however is that this forces the moles to eat more earthworms, which you actually want in your lawn and garden! A five-ounce mole can consume 50 pounds of insects and earthworms a year, so you may want to control moles just to prevent them from eating all your earthworms!

There are some commercial repellent products, and even more home remedies, most of which are probably more annoying to humans than moles, and are rarely effective. Poison baits are not recommended as they can endanger other wildlife as well as pets and children. The best control seems to be traps. Try placing a mousetrap, baited with peanut butter, at the opening of an active tunnel. Then cover the opening and the trap with a clay pot. This keeps other critters out of the trap, and makes the mole think the trap is in the tunnel. Other trap types are available from garden centres and hardware stores. Traps are most effective in spring and fall when moles are most active.

Voles are often called **meadow mice** or **field mice**, and they resemble mice with short tails. Like moles they make extensive tunnel systems, but unlike moles they are guilty of eating plants. Although they mainly feed on stems and seeds of grasses, they will feed on most ornamental plants too. They often gnaw on plants, sometimes girdling trees beneath the snow cover, or eating the roots of perennials. Obviously these plants are weakened if not outright killed as a result. Organic fertilizers may smell good if you're a vole, so keeping these fertilizers away from plants in areas where voles are active may help to reduce their damage.

Techniques for controlling voles are similar to those for moles. The least toxic approaches to vole control include keeping gardens weeded, and grass mown, thus removing habitats. Avoid mulching too deeply, and in late Fall don't pile up mulch around roses or other shrubs until the ground is frozen, otherwise you may just be inviting the little critters to make their homes there. Also, in the winter try to keep snow away from bases of trees and shrubs. It's also worth using plastic tree protectors on young trees. These are cheap, reusable and effective.