Southerners Battle Myriad Pests

Here's an overview of what they face — and how they treat them

BY WILL HUDSON

While superintendents throughout the country have to deal with insect problems on a regular basis, those of us in warm-season areas, particularly in the Southern and South-eastern states, may have more (and more severe) pest problems than our counterparts in other areas.

Mild weather and a longer growing season extend the playing season for golfers who enjoy the grass and for bugs that eat it alike. Some of these pests are unique to warmer areas; others just feed longer or have more generations per year. All can do serious damage to the grass and to the budgets of those that manage fine turf.

Mole crickets are easily the most serious pests of turf-grass, particularly on golf courses, in the coastal plain region of the South and Southeast. Introduced from South America about 100 years ago, they now infest turf from North Carolina to Florida and west to Texas. There are isolated populations in Arizona as well. They damage turf directly by feeding on the grass and indirectly by their extensive tunneling in the top inch or so of the soil. This damages the grass by clipping the roots and also loosens the surface layer of soil, leading to increased susceptibility to drought and reduced tolerance to traffic.

Heavy infestations can completely destroy the grass over large areas, even entire fairways, in a single season. Traditional programs for mole cricket control involved repeated applications of insecticides throughout the season (April-October in most Southern states and year-round in Florida) at a cost that could exceed $1,000 per hole, with results that were often unsatisfactory. This situation has improved over the last few years with the introduction of insecticides containing fipronil. Although the cost is still high — more than $200 an acre — a single application usually provides satisfactory control.

One advantage of the newer fipronil products is that they also control another serious problem for golf courses, the fire ant. This is also a South American import, but its range is considerably wider than the mole cricket. Introdu-

Hudson is a professor of entomology at the University of Georgia.