

# WHITE GRUBS IN ATHLETIC FIELD TURF- BIOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT

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A complex of primarily introduced white grub species are the most widespread and destructive turfgrass insect pests in the north-eastern USA. Until recently, the Japanese beetle (*Popillia japonica*) was regarded as the key species, but surveys have indicated that the oriental beetle, [*Anomala* (= *Exomala*) *orientalis*] has become the most important white grub species in New Jersey and some neighboring areas. The average white grub species composition in New Jersey home lawns in the fall of 2001 and 2002 (11 counties, 130 sites, emphasis on central NJ) was 63% oriental beetle, 14% Asiatic garden beetle (*Maladera castanea*), 12% Japanese beetle, 7% northern masked chafer (*Cyclocephala borealis*), 3% May/June beetle (*Phyllophaga* spp.), 2% green June beetle (*Cotinis nitida*), and 1% European chafer (*Rhizotrogus majalis*) (Koppenhöfer et al. unpublished data). However, it is important to keep in mind that species composition can vary considerably among sites and also from year to year.

Different white grub species can vary significantly in susceptibility to different control agents. Therefore proper species identification can be critical. The safest way to identify white grub species in the larval stage is to examine the raster pattern just in front of the anal slit on the grub's underside. Identification is the easiest when the grubs are 3<sup>rd</sup> instar larvae but at this point, the damage is often already done or impending. Therefore, identification should be done when grub populations are being monitored to determine whether curative treatments are necessary, i.e., in mid August.

Although the general life cycle of the important white grub species is very similar, the egg-laying period (major target for preventative treatments) and accordingly the occurrence of the voracious 3<sup>rd</sup> larval stage can vary by a few weeks among species; another reason for obtaining knowledge about the prevalent species in a turf site. Adult beetles emerge between June and August, mate, and the females return into the soil to lay eggs (total of about 20-60) individually or in small batches over a period of 2-4 weeks. The egg stage, 1<sup>st</sup> larval stage, and 2<sup>nd</sup> larval stage each last about 3 weeks so that through September most of the grubs will molt to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and last larval stage. As the soil temperatures cool down in October, the grubs move to deeper soil layers to stay below the frost line to overwinter. During this time most species are more or less inactive. As the soil temperatures warm up in spring, the grubs come up to the root zone to feed for another 4-6 weeks in April and May before they pupate in the soil.

## Signs of infestation

White grubs damage turf by chewing off roots close to the soil surface. The voracious feeding of the larger late 2<sup>nd</sup> stage and 3<sup>rd</sup> stage grubs, when combined with hot and dry conditions, can result in quick and extensive loss of turf from late August through mid-October. All cool-season and many warm-season grasses are susceptible to white grubs. Being alert to the signs and symptoms of white grub infestations will help avoid unexpected loss. Early signs of a white grub infestation include gradual thinning, yellowing, wilting in spite of adequate soil moisture, and the appearance of scattered, irregular dead patches. The patches grow and may join together until large turf areas are affected. Due to the grubs' tunneling activity, infested turf feels spongy underfoot and can be pulled up easily, exposing the C-shaped white grubs. Secondary, often more severe, damage can be caused by verte-

brate predators (e.g., crows, skunks, raccoons), that tear up the turf to feed on the grubs.

## Early detection, sampling and monitoring, damage thresholds

Mid- to late August, when the grubs are primarily 2<sup>nd</sup> instars, is the time to monitor for potentially damaging white grub populations. The only way to accurately determine the presence of white grubs is through examining the upper 3-4" of soil under the turf. Most conveniently turf/soil plugs are sampled with a standard golf course hole cutter (4.25" diam ~ 0.1 ft<sup>2</sup>). More tedious is the use of an oversized hole cutter (6" diam ~ 0.2 ft<sup>2</sup>; "turf mender") or cutting a square-foot sample with a flat-blade spade. The plugs can be broken up and examined on the spot (preferably on a tray). To improve sample survival, split the soil end of the sample first into halves and then quarters and smaller pieces to reveal the grubs that typically will occur near the thatch-soil interface. Record the number, species (check raster pattern with a hand lens), and life stages on a data sheet or map. Place the soil back in the hole and replace the sod cap. Irrigate to promote turf recovery especially when dry. Because white grub populations have a patchy distribution, several samples should be taken in a grid pattern. Rarely does an entire turf area require treatment.

To save time and effort, sampling can be concentrated on suspected infestation areas, high risk or low tolerance areas, or areas with a history of grub infestations. If historical information is not available and/or a more accurate idea of grub distributions is necessary, mapping and surveying is the thing to do. Using graph paper, prepare a general map of the turf area including landmarks. Mark sampling spots at 6-10 feet (lawns) or 10-20 feet (sports fields) apart in a grid pattern. At each spot take a sample and record number, species, and stage of grubs found (also record 0s!). Experienced samplers can process about 20 samples per hour.

To determine whether treatment is required, transform the grub numbers into 'per ft<sup>2</sup>'-values and compare to damage thresholds. Most published damage thresholds lie in the range of 6-10 (Japanese beetle, oriental beetle, masked chafers, European chafer) and 15-20 (Asiatic garden beetle) grubs per ft<sup>2</sup>. However, damage thresholds vary considerably with grass species, management type, and climatic conditions. For example, well-maintained tall fescue turf may tolerate 30 or more grubs per ft<sup>2</sup> without any signs of turf damage. In contrast, perennial ryegrass is the least grub tolerant of the cool-season grasses and 10 grubs per ft<sup>2</sup> are very likely to cause damage. With experience, turf managers should develop their own range of thresholds for the various turf areas they are responsible for.

## Preventative white grub control

Because of their long residual in the soil, the neonicotinoids imidacloprid (Merit) and clothianidin (Arena), and the insect growth regulator halofenozide (Mach2), can be applied as early as May and June, respectively, to provide season-long white grub control. If applied that early, various other insect pest can also be controlled (Merit, Arena, and Mach2: billbugs, annual bluegrass weevil, greenbugs; Arena and Mach2: cutworms, sod webworms; Arena: chinch bugs). If white grubs are the primary targets, the optimal application time for Arena, Merit, and Mach2 is June/July when the female beetles are laying eggs. At

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this time, control efficacy against many white grub species is typically in excess of 90%. As the larvae hatch and go through their 3 larval stages, they become less susceptible to these insecticides (and other insecticides). Applications against the 3<sup>rd</sup> larval stage in September are not recommended.

However, some white grubs species are less susceptible to some of these compounds. Oriental beetle and European chafer are very susceptible to Arena and Merit but MACH2 has only provided 50% control on average and should be applied right around peak egg-laying activity. Japanese beetle is very susceptible to all three compounds, and even mid-September applications can still provide around 70% control. Applications after mid-August, however, may not kill the grubs quickly enough to avoid impending damage. Masked chafers are less susceptible to Merit, and where this species prevails, applications should be done during egg laying (June-July) and at the highest label rate. The Asiatic garden beetle is not susceptible to Mach2 and Merit and Arena may provide acceptable control only at the highest label rate.

Because preventative applications have to be done before white grub populations can be estimated through soil sampling they are often applied to areas that would need only partial or no control at all. This increases the cost of grub management, increases the chances of

resistance development, and may in the long-term dramatically reduce populations of natural enemies by depriving them of prey or hosts. Smart turfgrass manager will restrict preventative applications to high-risk areas, i.e., areas with extremely low damage threshold and tolerance, areas with a history of white grub infestations, and areas with high beetle activity (egg-laying) in June-July.

## Curative white grub control

If soil sampling has revealed white grub populations, areas with densities above treatment thresholds or ongoing damage may need to be treated. This curative control approach works best if applied while the grubs are still smaller (i.e., August to early September). Monitoring and sampling helps optimize application timing and restrict treatments to areas that actually have high grub populations. Once the grubs have reached the 3<sup>rd</sup> instar, they are much harder to control. Spring applications (late April through May) are generally the least effective and rarely justified because the grass can outgrow most grub populations. Only very high grub populations, unduly stressed turf, or digging grub predators can cause damage at this time. Any necessary treatments need to be applied before the grubs pupate. Due to the annual life cycle of the grubs, areas that had no damaging infestation or were successfully treated in the previous late summer/fall,

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will not need treatment in the following spring.

For best results with any insecticide, mow the turf and rake out dead grass and thatch before treatment. This will reduce the amount of insecticide bound up by surface debris. Irrigate with 0.25-0.5" water immediately after treatment (or timely rainfall) to leach the insecticide into the root zone where the grubs are feeding. Irrigation also increases insecticide contact by drawing the grubs closer to the surface. If the soil is very dry, pre-treatment irrigation 1 day before treatment will also increase efficacy by bringing grubs closer to surface and reducing thatch binding and evaporation of liquid treatments. However, do not apply soil insecticides to saturated soil. Also, granular formulations need to be applied to dry grass to allow the granules to sift down into the thatch. Liquid and granular applications are usually equally effective, however, granular formulations are more forgiving if post-treatment irrigation is delayed.

Successful treatments typically kill 75-90% of the grubs but product performance varies with soil type, thatch thickness, and grub species. Therefore, evaluate treatments and keep record of product performance. While speed of kills varies with insecticides, soil insecticide applications never work overnight. Affected grubs usually turn yellow or brown within a week of treatment. Wait at least 1-2 weeks before evaluating. But don't wait longer than 3 weeks to allow for a follow-up treatment if the 1<sup>st</sup> treatment was ineffective. In the latter

case, don't apply the same product again. Rather try a different compound. While development of grub resistance to insecticides is unlikely with the presently used short-residual insecticides, some grub control failures can be caused by enhanced microbial degradation of the insecticide, especially after repeated insecticide use. Avoid unnecessary applications and alternate insecticides.

The range of insecticides available for curative white grub control has already and will continue being effected by the implementation of the Food Quality Protection Act of 1996. Presently only two synthetic insecticides are labeled for grub control: the organophosphates trichlorfon (Dylox) and the carbamate carbaryl (Sevin). Against larger larvae, Dylox appears to be more effective. Presently available nematode products for grub control contain the species *Heterorhabditis bacteriophora* or *Heterorhabditis megidis*. These nematodes can be very effective against Japanese beetle grubs, but are less effective against grubs of oriental beetle, Asiatic garden beetle, and masked chafers, and ineffective against European chafer. While these nematode products have to be handled and stored with more care than chemical insecticides (you are dealing with living organisms!), they have the advantage of no reentry interval due to their non-toxicity.

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