

Black Turfgrass Ataenius: Some Observations

Black turfgrass ataenius grubs reappeared on the scene in 1973 as a pest of golf course fairways. This grub was different in its life history, habits and host plants than the typical white grub, whether the annual or the 3-year grub species. There was good life history information available 15 years ago, including timing of adult activity to tree and shrub phenology. Greenskeepers hear horror stories of 100, 200 or even 400+ grubs per square foot on some fairways of other courses.

Briefly, the life history can be described as follows: the ¼ inch adult black beetles overwinter in wooded swamp areas adjacent to the golf course. The shiny beetles begin to migrate to golf courses in April when crocus are in bloom. Egg laying peaks when "bridal wreath" spirea and Washington hawthorns are in bloom. At Urbana, this is usually about May 15 and a week later each 100 miles north or May 22-24 in South Cook County and much later in Lake and North Cook Counties with the cool lake effect. It is common to observe black ataenious beetles in the greens mower baskets at this time. Egg hatch and small grubs begin to feed on the roots of annual bluegrass and sometimes bentgrass. Wilted turf caused by grub feeding will appear about three to four weeks after egg laying.

Monitoring for ataenius grubs requires someone checking low areas in the fairways, especially where damage occurred in previous years. Check for wilted areas, loose sod or presence of grubs. A cup cutter is a good tool to sample for ataenius grubs in non-wilted sod. The grubs, if present, will be feeding at the soil surface. Cut only through the first inch of soil with the cutter. The threshold for ataenius grubs to cause damage is 50 per square foot. Sample many sites in fairways with a history of grub infestations. Pie-shaped cuts with a pocket knife will also expose grubs, if present.

Effective grub control products labeled for use of golf courses include trichlorfos (Proxol or Dylox), Turcaim, and Triumph. There are other labeled products for grub control but are not suggested. For the best results after detecting a grub infestation, follow the following steps: (1) Determine the size of the infestation—how many fairways are involved. (2) Water the infested area. (3) Apply the product according to labeled rate and directions. (4) Immediately water the treatment into the soil surface. (5) Evaluate product performance every 4 to 6 days.

Most materials will cause grubs to cease feeding in 3 or 4 days. Do not expect eradication of the grub population; 90 percent control is outstanding. Also, in case you have forgotten, there is the possibility of a second generation in August. It is unusual for this generation to be a problem, but it can happen. Adult beetles migrate back to the swampy area in late September to overwinter as adults.

During the past 17 seasons since 1973 there have been some interesting occurrences with black turfgrass ataenius grubs. Numbers of infested golf courses increased in the 1970s and declined after the mid 1980s. The drought years of 1987 and 1988 reduced favorable overwintering sites and this reduced overall populations. This effect can reverse during the early 1990s. Some growing seasons were warmer than others. 1987 was usually warm; therefore, the heat units accumulated caused the season to be 14 to 18 days ahead of normal. Ataenius eggs

were laid in early May and then damage appeared in early June in the Chicago area.

In summary then, ataenius grubs can be a pest insect on some golf course fairways. It can be effectively monitored or scouted by one of the superintendents. If there is a sufficient number of grubs to cause damage, treatments can be applied for control. The days of treating the entire course with a preventive insecticide are over. We should be more professional than to use this outdated practice. And finally, I wish someone would have come up with a better common name for this grub pest!

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