

Watch for sod webworms in lawn during fall

Q. I noticed small light brown moths flying out of shrubbery that I was pruning. I've seen these same moths flying low to the ground in my lawn. Should I be concerned about this?

A. Yes and no. These are probably adults of the tropical sod webworm. The moths have a wingspan of $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch and are tan to gray. The moths do not cause damage. So don't bother trying to control them. But their presence is reason to keep a close eye on your lawn for evidence of the larval stage feeding. The larvae are small caterpillars. They're greenish when young, turning brown at maturity. Their feeding results in notched or ragged leaf edges.

Being tropical, sod webworms normally do not over winter in our area. They usually do not arrive in our area until late summer to early fall. Some years their population will be high. Other years we do not see them.

Sod webworms feed at night. So don't be surprised if you can't find them during the day. They rest, curled up near the soil line during the day. If your lawn has damaged spots, look closely for notched leaf blades from their chewing damage. You may find a dusty material left behind from their feeding. Some people tell me they first notice a patch in their lawn that looks like it has been mowed extra low. Closer inspection reveals grass blades that have been chewed away.

Sod webworms' favorite grass is bermuda. Their least favorite is bahia. They will attack St. Augustinegrass and centipedegrass.

Soap flush is a technique to survey for some lawn insects, including sod webworms. Mix two ounces of liquid dishwashing soap in two gallons of water and apply with a sprinkling can to a four square foot area of injured turf. This technique is a good way to identify sod webworms.

They may also be found by parting the grass and looking for small green caterpillars curled up on the soil surface and for small green pellet-like droppings. Because they are nocturnal, a flashlight used at night will expose the caterpillars feeding.

Sod webworms can be controlled with the same insecticides as the other lawn insects. But you may also use insecticides that contain *Bacillus thuringiensis*, a bacterium that only kills caterpillars and won't harm beneficial insects in your lawn.

Sod webworms may weaken the lawn but they usually do not kill the grass. Because the damage occurs late in the growing season, the lawn may not completely recover until spring.

Additional information on these caterpillars is found at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/IN608>.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County, September 25, 2008