Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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As the weather warms in the spring and lawns begin to grow, one can sometimes see irregular brown patches that do not seem to be greening up as nicely as the rest of the lawn. This may be an indication that crane fly larvae or "leather jackets" are feeding on the grass roots. If you suspect that you have an infestation of crane flies do not panic. There a few facts you should know before you begin searching the shelves in your local garden store for a chemical to apply.

First, to determine how severe the problem is, dig a one foot by one foot square of turf 1 or 2 inches thick and actually count the numbers of gray-brown, one inch, leathery, larvae present. This should be done during active feeding in the early spring. The larvae begin to feed as the soil warms up, usually March or even earlier depending on the temperatures. Feeding ends in mid May. If you find less than 25 leather jackets per square foot, you do not need to resort to chemical treatment.

Crane fly larvae populations will usually decline by 50 percent between March 15 and May 15 due to natural controls. Birds eat enormous numbers of larvae in the spring. Another thing to consider is a healthy, well-fed lawn can overcome crane fly damage much more quickly than one that is not in good condition. Fertilizing the lawn to keep it vigorous is a good way to minimize the problem. Robust grass is able to outgrow the leather jacket damage.

Many of the chemicals that once were available to the homeowner for use to control crane flies have now been taken off the market due to environmental considerations. Check with the WSU Extension office for names of approved insecticides. They are listed in the Pacific Northwest Handbook for Insect Control or WSU bulletin EB 0482. If you feel that you must use a chemical, be sure to read the label carefully and follow directions for the safest outcome.

After feeding just below the soil surface on the roots of grass for 2 or 3 months the larvae pupate into a non-feeding stage in mid May. In late August and through September the pupa wiggle to the surface of the soil and the adult crane fly emerges. It looks a lot like a huge mosquito.

It has very long legs and is a clumsy flyer and bumbles about running into things and falling down. Unlike mosquitoes, crane flies do not bite nor do they do any damage to homes or yards. Their only mission in their short lives is to mate and lay eggs to insure a new generation of leather jackets. They lay their eggs in the grass within 24 hours of emerging from the pupa case. The eggs hatch into small wormlike larvae, which develop a tough skin as they develop. These larvae feed in the fall and then winter over in the soil. The European crane fly, Tipula paludosa, has become a pest in Western Washington and Oregon and is migrating into British Columbia. It can cause devastating damage in pastures, golf courses and turf farms. They will sometimes feed on the roots on annual and perennial flowers, some types of vegetables and small fruits.

This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.