

Battling Gophers and Moles by Marty Morgan, Wise County Ag Agent

Pocket gophers are burrowing rodents which live almost entirely underground. Gophers are well adapted to their underground existence, with stout forelegs and strong curved claws for digging. They have prominent, yellow incisor teeth and large, fur-lined external cheek pouches in which food is carried. Pocket gophers have poor eyesight, but their other senses are acute. I am already receiving lots of calls on how to control or eradicate these bothersome critters. So one question is do I have moles or Gophers? Although they look similar to rodents, moles are actually a different type of mammal. One reason moles are often mistaken for rodents is that rodents like pocket gophers and voles, often take safe passage in abandoned mole tunnels. One telltale sign of rodents versus moles is that Rodents make clearly visible entry and exit holes to the tunnels. Moles do not.

So the looming question is how do we control or eradicate these little critters that are good for nothing except maybe Aerating the soil and making a mess. Well it will not be easy I can assure you, and will take some labor on your part. First let's talk about Moles and what doesn't work, has limited success, or is just a bad idea. Like human hair, chewed bubble gum, broken glass, engine oil, mothballs, gasoline, drain cleaner, chocolate covered laxatives placed down tunnels. As well as not working, some of these are quite dangerous or toxic as well as environmentally unsound, so don't pour gasoline or oil down those holes. Some have tried sonic devices, flooding the tunnels, fumigation or smoke bombs. As for Moles some try insecticides to kill its food source (Earthworms; grubs), and that's a bad idea as moles can eat other things not affected by insecticides and you are killing something that's good for the soil. Many insecticides are harmful to people, pets, and wildlife. Some of the old timers swore by spearmint gum to drive them away, others say put dry ice packs in the tunnels and when it begins to thaw it gives off carbon dioxide which will suffocate them(that actually works). But those who have fought moles most of their life will tell you that trapping is the most dependable method of controlling moles.

Ok let's talk Gopher control. This should be conducted during the spring and fall when pocket gophers are most active near the surface. Their activity is usually indicated by the presence of fresh mounds of dirt. Control in the fall interfere the least with growing crops. Methods of control include mechanical and chemical means. Special traps have been designed to capture gophers. Several different types are available but your success depends upon the proper use of traps. What about Chemical Control? Effective control materials for gophers are strychnine-treated grain and zinc phosphide pellets. Toxic baits can be administered by the hand probe method or with a burrow builder. These methods are most efficient for large or heavily infested areas where trapping is not practical like pastures or hayfields. But you must place the toxic grain underground in the tunnels so that it is relatively safe when used around other wildlife, pets and livestock. However, you should always carefully read and follow pesticide label instructions. Some of these products are classified as "restricted use" and require a certified pesticide applicator's license. Remember the label is the law! There are decent products that work if you can get it placed correctly and have plenty of time on your hands. There are some organic repellents out there but most of them are for voles, not moles and gophers. Without being unsafe using chemicals, there really is no easy or good way to control either of these critters. If you would like to read up on these pesky little devils, we have some publications I can email you, or stop by the office.