

A Lesson in Mole Tolerance

By Susan Camp

Spring this year on the Middle Peninsula has been uncharacteristically long, cool, and rainy, reminding me more of Seattle than Tidewater Virginia. Trees and plants are lush and green and when the sun pops through the clouds, the flowers begin to open in riotous color. The ground is soft underfoot and boggy in places; I have to watch where I step to avoid sinking into a mud hole. I hadn't thought too much about our old friend, Mole, who leaves treacherous tunnels through the yard every spring, but I stepped into one last week and sank shoe-deep into the soft earth.

Mole is one of the critters that cause gardeners and lawn enthusiasts to lose hours of sleep during spring nights. I have heard tales of homeowners going after an offending mole with the manic tenacity of Bill Murray hunting down the gopher in "Caddyshack."

Adult moles are small mammals, about 4 to 8 inches long that spend their lives burrowing underground, searching day and night for grubs, earthworms, snails, and slugs. They must consume 60 to 100% of their body weight every day in order to survive, according to Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 420-021, "Managing Wildlife Damage: Moles". Moles are insectivores and consume seeds or plants only accidentally while burrowing, but they may damage roots or upend plants they encounter.

Three species of mole are found in Virginia, one of which lives only in the Appalachians. The mole most commonly found in our region is the eastern mole (*Scalopus aquaticus*), with its naked tail. The star-nosed mole (*Condylura cristata*) also is found in the Coastal Plain. Its unique nose, consisting of short, fleshy tentacles, may help the animal navigate in its environment. All moles have velvety, black or brownish-gray fur and short, outward-turned forefeet with powerful claws designed for tunneling. They have poor eyesight, but can distinguish light from dark. Moles prefer sandy loam and avoid rocky or heavy clay soils.

Moles have a terrible reputation for ruining lawns and gardens, but, in reality, they can be helpful. Moles are solitary creatures, so while it may seem like an entire army of furry miners has invaded your property, chances are good that there is only one and he will spend his entire four years of life tunneling. Moles breed in February and March, with females producing litters of two to five young in four to six weeks. The young leave the nests after five to six weeks to establish their own territories.

Each mole produces an extensive underground tunneling system, consisting of shallow feeding tunnels or "runways" visible above ground, and deep excavations that lead to living areas that are safe from most predators, drought, and freezing weather. Molehills on the surface are made up of soil that the mole has moved out of the way. Positive effects of mole excavation include soil

aeration, improved drainage, and the mixing of soil components and nutrients. Along the way, moles consume the larvae of many lawn and garden pests, including Japanese beetle grubs.

At present, there is no commercial or homemade product available that will reliably rid your garden of moles. There is no Pied Piper to lead them out of your garden. We have all heard success stories with spearmint chewing gum, garlic, mothballs (naphtha), and broken glass or used razor blades. Moles will simply wall off the sharp objects and tunnel around them. Poisoned bait doesn't work because moles feed on insects. Gas cartridges and smoke bombs aren't dependable and many techniques and products pose a danger to gardeners, children, and pets.

Perhaps it is best to look at the positive aspects of having a mole tenant and, as the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife article, "Living with Wildlife—Moles" noted, practice tolerance and "passive acceptance."

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