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Managing 10 Common Texas Yard Pests

A "TAKE CARE OF TEXAS" GUIDE

Gardening and yard care can give you satisfying results, such as beautiful landscapes and abundant wildlife. However, yard pests can be discouraging, even for the most committed gardener. Learn environmentally friendly ways to get rid of these 10 common Texas yard pests, so that you can better enjoy your landscape, and take care of Texas in your yard.

Quick Tips to Avoid Pests

- Irrigate efficiently. Water infrequently, but thoroughly (generally 1 inch, once a week), and do so in the mornings.
- Use native and adapted plants, which are better suited to the local environment and can resist most pests.
- Mow properly, taking off no more than one-third of the grass blade with each mowing.
- Choose natural or organic fertilizers, avoid overusing fertilizers, and encourage natural predators such as worms, ladybugs, certain beetles and mites, and birds.
- Monitor for pests often to catch infestations early and determine if control is needed; many times, natural predators may make treatment unnecessary.

1. Aphids

Aphids are tiny (1/16 to 1/8") insects with a soft body, long legs, and antennae. Most aphids are host-plant specific and usually do not move to other species.

Infestation and Attack

Aphids attack new growth or the underside of leaves. They suck sap from plants and excrete clear, sticky "honeydew" onto leaves. This honeydew often causes a black, sooty fungus that blocks sunlight from leaves. Typically, aphids attack bedding plants, crape myrtle, hibiscus, oaks, o eanders, pecans, roses, and vegetables.

Prevention or Solutions

- After you identify an infestation, introduce ladybugs, lacewings, and other beneficial insects to your landscape. For best results, follow release instructions carefully and release in an enclosed area.
- Use sticky barriers to prevent ants from tending the aphids and protecting them from natural predators.
- For minor infestations, spray host plants with water at high pressure to dislodge the aphids.
- Use insecticidal soaps and horticultural oils to help control the aphids.

- When appropriate, use row covers, which will physically keep the aphids off vegetable crops while still allowing air, light, and water exchange.

2. Caterpillars

Pest caterpillars include the tomato hornworm, the tent caterpillar, the genista caterpillar, and the spring cankerworm.

Caterpillars are the larval stage of butterflies, so butterfly-gardening enthusiasts should expect some caterpillar damage.

Infestation and Attack

Caterpillars can be found year-round but are most prevalent in spring and fall.

Prevention or Solutions

- Do not treat native trees; caterpillar infestations are natural and rarely threaten the health of a tree unless it is already stressed or weakened.
- Monitor infestations of very young caterpillars to see if natural controls such as predators, parasitic wasps, or harsh weather will eliminate the infestation. Try releasing parasitic wasps when caterpillars first appear.



Aphid



Tomato Hornworm



Tent Caterpillar



Spring Cankerworm

- Dislodge young (small) tent caterpillars with a broom or with high-pressure water sprays, to allow parasitic wasps easier access.
- You can remove by hand egg masses or groups of caterpillars found on trees or branches, or prune them out of the tree and destroy them. You can drop handpicked caterpillars into a bucket of soapy water.
- Use row covers as a barrier in vegetable gardens.
- Treat young caterpillars with *Bacillus thuringiensis*, but not near butterfly gardens.

3. Fleas

Fleas are tiny insects with hind legs adapted for jumping. They leave black droppings around pet sleeping areas and jump when disturbed.

Infestation and Attack

Fleas can attack pets and people. Flea bites mostly occur on the lower legs and can cause redness and itching. Most adult fleas live on the animal host, although flea eggs and larvae can be found in moist soil in the yard, as well as in bedding and carpet.

Prevention or Solutions

- Keep your house well-vacuumed, especially where your pet rests. Immediately dispose of vacuum bags after use, to prevent fleas from escaping back into your home.
- Steam clean carpets to remove organic material, which is food for flea larvae.
- Wash your pet's bedding regularly in hot water. If pets sleep with you, wash your bedding frequently as well.
- Use a flea comb to remove fleas from your pet; drop the fleas in a bucket of soapy water.
- Shampoo your pet regularly with a gentle shampoo to remove fleas and flea eggs. Shampoos containing pesticides are not necessary, because any soapy water will kill fleas.
- If areas of your yard are heavily infested with fleas, treat these areas using a spray of beneficial nematodes (small, round worms). These organisms kill flea larvae, but are not harmful to the environment.

4. Fire Ants

Fire ant colonies include a queen (or queens), winged males and females, workers, and brood. Colonies can create mounds up to 18 inches tall.

Infestation and Attack

Fire ants prefer open, sunny areas such as lawns, pastures, and parks. They are most prevalent in spring and fall. Fire ants do not injure turf grass, but their mounds can become unsightly. Ants are aggressive and cause painful stings.

Prevention or Solutions

- Carefully pour a large pot (about 3 gallons) of boiling water on each mound. This will kill a mound about 60 percent of the time, and works best after a rain.
- Introduce nematodes, applying them to moist soil, at dusk.
- Choose baits over contact products. Baits are safer to use because they are ant-specific and formulated with very small percentages of the active ingredients. Make sure to use fresh bait, and to apply it when the ants are foraging.
- Organize your neighbors to treat fire ants at the same time, to avoid driving the ants from yard to yard.

5. Chinch Bugs

Adult chinch bugs are small and slender (1/6 to 1/5" long). They have black bodies and whitish wings with black "bases" on their forewings. Recently hatched nymphs are wingless and pinkish-red, with a light-colored band across their backs.

Infestation and Attack

Chinch bugs primarily attack St. Augustine grass, but may feed on zoysia or Bermuda grass as well. They cause expanding, irregular patches of dead or stunted grass surrounded by a halo of yellowing, dying grass.

Prevention or Solutions

- Make your yard a haven for beneficial predator insects, such as birds and big-eyed bugs, by avoiding the wide use of lawn chemicals.



Flea



Fire Ants



Chinch Bugs

- Check for chinch bug infestation on the grass blades at the edges of affected areas. To test, cut the bottom out of a coffee can, push the can one inch into your turf near the edge of a dead patch, and fill the can with water. If chinch bugs are present, they will float to the surface.
- If there are signs of damage, spot-treat only the infected areas, with insecticidal soaps.

6. Grubs

Grubs are small (1/2 to 1" long), C-shaped, and creamy white, with three pairs of legs. Grubs are the larva stage of the June beetle, or June bug.

Infestation and Attack

Grubs attack St. Augustine, Bermuda, zoysia, and buffalo grasses. They feed on roots and other underground parts, and are most prevalent during the summer and fall months.

Least-Toxic Solutions

- Only treat when more than 5–10 grubs per square foot are found.
- Apply beneficial nematodes to the affected areas.
- Choose the most effective time for treatment: mid-June to late July.

7. Mosquitoes

Adult mosquitoes are small, long-legged flies with two scaly wings and long, segmented antennae. Mosquitoes have long piercing and sucking mouthparts. They lay their eggs in still water.

Infestation and Attack

Mosquitoes are found in Texas year-round, but become more prevalent in



Grub Worm

Mosquito

Spider Mite

Snail

Slug

Cucumber
Beetle

spring and summer. They are most active between dusk and dawn.

Prevention or Solutions

- Eliminate breeding sites by reducing the amount of standing water in your yard. Use bacterial larvicide tablets to reduce mosquitoes in rain barrels or in permanent bodies of water.
- Light citronella candles to provide short-term relief in patios and other outside areas.
- Wear light-colored, loose-fitting clothing when outside. If you opt to use mosquito repellents, apply to clothing and exposed skin according to the instructions on the label. Once indoors, wash any treated skin with soap and water.
- Repair leaky faucets and outdoor pipes.
- For pets, use topical, spot treatments to help repel mosquitoes. Since heartworms are transmitted by mosquitoes, use heartworm medication in conjunction with the repellents.

8. Spider Mites

Adults are tiny (1/50 to 1/50"), spiderlike insects with eight legs and no antennae. They vary in color.

Infestation and Attack

Spider mites lay eggs on the underside of leaves and on buds. They attack fruit trees, tomatoes, marigolds, strawberries, roses, junipers, rosemary, and many house plants.

Prevention or Solutions

- Take a white piece of paper and strike some affected leaves on it—you'll see the mites crawling on the paper.
- Encourage natural enemies like green lacewing larvae, ladybugs, and predatory mites.

- For minor infestations, spray the host plants weekly with high-pressure water, spraying upward from beneath the plant foliage.
- Apply insecticidal soaps or horticultural oils; spray upward from beneath the plant foliage.

9. Snails and Slugs

Snails and slugs have fleshy, soft, slimy, legless bodies (1/2 to 4" long). They range in color from whitish-yellow to black. They are slow-moving and require moisture for survival. Snails have a hard, spiral shell on their backs that provides protection from predators and during periods of excessive heat and dryness.

Infestation and Attack

Snails and slugs attack the leaves, flowers, and stems of plants. They can completely devour young vegetable seedlings overnight.

Prevention or Solutions

- Handpick snails and slugs at night when they are active, and drop them in a jar of soapy water.
- Attract snails overnight to a hollowed-out melon rind or a shallow container filled with beer or apple cider. Dispose of them in the early morning and replenish the bait often.
- Destroy snail and slug eggs, which look like crystal beads and are often found in large clusters under rocks and debris.
- Eliminate their hiding places, such as under flowerpots and landscape timbers. Place barriers of copper stripping around planters to prevent snails and slugs from reaching the plants.

- Use window-screen material or row covers to protect seedlings.
- Finally, and only if significant plant damage begins to appear, you can use snail and slug baits, as a last resort.

10. Beetles

The two most common pest beetles are the flea beetle and the cucumber beetle.

There are several types of beneficial beetles, which feed on caterpillars, aphids, and other pests. Helpful beetles include the ground beetle and the ladybird beetle, or ladybug.

Infestation and Attack

The flea beetle attacks many vegetables, including cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant. Their larvae feed underground on roots. Flea beetles create a "shotgun" pattern of feeding damage on leaves, and may also spread diseases such as potato blight and bacterial wilt.

The cucumber beetle attacks all members of the squash and cucumber family. They cause minimal feeding damage but they spread diseases, such as bacterial wilt and squash mosaic virus, that can kill plants.

Prevention or Solutions

- Choose disease-resistant varieties of squash, such as "cougar," "sunglo," and "sunray," and irrigate efficiently.
- Use trellises to get your plants off the ground and mulch heavily around the plants.
- Remove dead plant materials and debris from your garden.
- Treat the soil with beneficial nematodes.

Pesticide Use

If you feel that you must use a pesticide, make choices that are less harmful to the environment:

- Use the least-toxic pesticide first. Always read the label and follow the instructions of any pesticide you choose.
- Avoid applying broad-spectrum pesticides; they destroy beneficial insects as well as pests, leaving trees or shrubs unprotected if pests return.
- Apply pesticides only to plants that are specified on the label. Some formulations injure tender ornamental plants and new growth.
- Mix pesticides according to their directions and apply only the recommended dosage.
- Avoid systemic pesticides on vegetables and other edible plants. Systemic pesticides are taken up by the plant, making its tissues and fluids toxic to feeding pests, and unsafe for human consumption.
- For best results, apply non-systemic pesticides to all infested plant surfaces. Non-systemic pesticides must come into direct contact with the insects in order to work.
- Avoid the overuse of chemicals. Many pests have become resistant to certain pesticides.

In most cases, disposing of leftover or unwanted pesticides in the regular trash is acceptable. However, there are disposal options that better protect the environment. Consider taking these kinds of items to a household hazardous waste facility for disposal. Visit www.recycletexasonline.org or www.cleanup.org to find a location.

Managing 10 Common Texas Yard Pests complements the "Take Care of Texas" *Guide to Yard Care*, which is meant to be a general overview of environmentally friendly practices for your yard. For more detailed information, see the following other TCEQ "Take Care of Texas" guides at www.takecareoftexas.org/publications:

- *The "Take Care of Texas" Guide to Yard Care* (GI-28)
- *Mulching and Composting* (GI-36)
- *Rainwater Harvesting with Rain Barrels* (GI-383)
- *Managing Lawn Problems in Texas* (GI-407)
- *Landscape Irrigation* (GI-409)

Additional Resources

General Information

Texas Commission on Environmental Quality
www.tceq.state.tx.us

Texas Water Development Board
www.twdb.state.tx.us

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
www.epa.gov

Texas AgriLife Extension Service
<http://agrillifeextension.tamu.edu>

Sustainable Yard Care

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
www.epa.gov/epawaste/conservation/greenscapes/index.htm
www.epa.gov/greenacres

YardWise
www.yardwise.org

Texas AgriLife Extension, EarthKind
<http://earthkind.tamu.edu/>

City of Austin, Grow Green
www.ci.austin.tx.us/growgreen

Publications

Earth-wise Guide to Products Toxicity Ratings. Austin: City of Austin and the Texas Cooperative Extension, 2008. (8 pp.)
www.tceq.state.tx.us/goto/wiseguide

Natural Gardening. Portland, Ore.: Portland Metro and Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, 2007. (70 pp.)
www.oregonmetro.gov/index.cfm/go/by.web/id=645

Organic Gardening (monthly magazine).
Published by Rodale, Inc.
www.organicgardening.com

Rodale's Ultimate Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening: The Indispensable Green Resource for Every Gardener. Edited by Fern Marshall Bradley, Ellen Phillips, and Barbara Ellis. Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale Books, 2009. (720 pp.)

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