Getting a leg up on grasshoppers in the landscape

They look rather prehistoric, and they can make a pretty good smudge mark on your vehicle’s windshield. And oh boy, can they jump. Oklahoma’s forests and grassland landscapes serve as a great host to more than 130 resident species of grasshoppers.

Although they can be destructive, it’s fortunate there are only few species that become pest problems. The redlegged, migratory, differential and two-striped grasshoppers are major pests, with the redlegged and two-striped species being the nemeses of gardeners.

Grasshoppers tend to be more problematic in rural areas, especially those surrounded by pastures or rangeland, or urban fringe areas containing large amounts of unkempt ground. These leggy pests can be difficult to control in the urban landscape, but homeowners can reduce their impact through the use of barriers and insecticides, along with selecting plants less prone to damage.

All grasshoppers undergo gradual metamorphosis and have three life stages, including egg, nymph and adult. Grasshoppers lay eggs in the soil during the fall in landscapes such as ditches, fencerows, shelter belts and weedy areas, as well as in harvested crop fields and pastures, and the eggs hatch the following spring.

In general, grasshoppers eat plants, but most specialize on grasses or broadleaf plants. However, the pest species feed on a wide variety of plants and will readily switch from grasses to broadleaves. As nymphs, grasshoppers typically stay close to the area in which they hatched, as long as there’s an adequate supply of food and shelter. They’ll move out when the food supply runs low. Immature grasshoppers can’t move far because they lack wings. However, winged adults can fly for miles in search of new food sources. Hungry grasshoppers like gardens because they have optimal moisture and an abundant food supply.

Grasshopper control can be challenging because they’re so migratory, but by using several control methods, persistence and patience, you should be able to get good control. It’s frustrating when gardeners continue to see grasshoppers even after plants have been sprayed. Unfortunately, even though the treatment killed the grasshoppers that were there, more grasshoppers have moved in to take their place. Grasshopper insecticides have a limited residual activity and won’t kill new arrivals after a few days.

To help cut down on the incidence of grasshoppers, choose plants grasshoppers don’t care for, including amaryllis, canna lily, iris, mums and wisteria, to name a few. For a more comprehensive list, check out Oklahoma State University Extension’s grasshopper fact sheet.
Treat hatching sites with a registered insecticide. In more suburban areas, work with your neighbors to find the sites and develop a neighborhood-wide control program.

Another option is to purchase floating row covers to protect vegetables and prized plants. The material allows sunlight to get through and allows for air circulation, but it’s strong enough to keep grasshoppers from feeding. Also, poultry, especially guinea hens, are effective natural predators.

There are several insecticides registered and effective at killing grasshoppers. Insecticides work better on small grasshoppers because it takes less active ingredient to kill them. However, using insecticides should be the line of last defense. None of the insecticides on the market will completely prevent damage from large grasshoppers because they have to do some feeding to pick up enough insecticide to die. Even pesticides with the longest lasting residues will have to be sprayed every three or four days when the grasshopper population is large.

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