

Gardeners Dealing with Grasshopper Damage
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Recently, several calls have come in concerning grasshoppers in the garden. Grasshopper populations are funny. Some gardens have been hit hard while other gardens as close as a mile away have been left alone. Most hoppers overwinter as eggs in the soil and emerge in May and June to start feeding on new succulent plant growth. Several species can be found in South Dakota and their food habits vary. Vegetable crops favored include lettuce, carrots, beets, sweet corn, and onions. Hoppers typically stay away from squash, peas, and tomatoes.

In the fall adult hoppers produce “egg beds” in the soil of dry soils that have not been disturbed by tillage or irrigation. After hatching in the spring tiny nymphs emerge and start feeding. The first few days of life for the young hopper are critical as weather or absence of food can cause high mortality rates. Cold, wet weather is unfavorable for hopper survival. Those hoppers that survive go through five or six molting stages before reaching adulthood. Adult hoppers can live for several months feeding, mating, and egg laying.

Grasshoppers are very difficult to control due to their mobility. Control is best achieved when measures are taken while the nymphs are very small. Baits and sprays can be used to control hoppers. Carbaryl (Sevin), acephate (Orthene), permethrin, and diflubezuron (Dimilin) are all effective for hoppers. Residual insecticides are more effective than contact insecticides. Be sure to read the entire label prior to using any chemical. Spraying bifenthrin (Telstar) or Beta-Cyfluthrin (Tempo) in the turf area around the perimeter of the garden can be effective if there is concern about spraying produce with chemicals. Neither of these chemicals can be sprayed directly on edible garden plants.

There are some “home remedies” like spraying plants with milk or a garlic oil mixture as a repellent. Make the garlic oil spray by combining 3 ounces of minced garlic cloves with 1 ounce of mineral oil. Let soak for 24 hours or longer and strain. Next mix 1 teaspoon of fish emulsion with 16 ounces of water and add 1 tablespoon of castile soap. Slowly combine the fish emulsion water with the garlic oil. Kept in a sealed glass container this mixture will stay viable for several months. To use: Mix 2 tablespoons of garlic oil with 1 pint of water and spray. These home remedies have not had sufficient research to be able to predict reliability or effectiveness.

Another good non-chemical option is to exclude grasshoppers from the garden. This can be done by using floating row covers. Floating row covers are a spun fiber that allows light, water, and air to get to the plants under it but not any insects the size of an aphid or larger. Grasshoppers are most definitely larger than an aphid.

Nature has a way of dealing with grasshopper infestations too. Many blister beetle larvae feed on grasshopper eggs. That’s good news for gardener but not so good for anyone who owns horses. Blister beetles are poisonous to horses and as few as 25 beetles ingested by a full grown horse can kill the horse. This summer there has been an increase in blister beetles and next year there may be more but less grasshoppers.

As always if you have questions or comments about this article or any other horticultural topic you can call me at (605) 394-2188 or email me at ricky.abrahamson@sdstate. Drop me a line and let me know what you think.