

News Article
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First the Drought, Now the Worms

It has been a rough year to grow anything because of the drought. Now we have to deal with the fall armyworm. I have had several reports of armyworms on cool season grazing and wildlife food plots. On plants already weakened by the drought these armyworm caterpillars can do some pretty major damage and the plants are much slower to recover.

The fall armyworm is a chronic pest in the Southeast. The caterpillars feed on a variety of forage crops, especially lush, green, well-fertilized forages. Forage grass hosts of the fall armyworm include bahiagrass, pearl millet, sorghumsudan hybrids, tall fescue, and various winter annuals including ryegrass, rye, wheat, and oats. More than 60 plants have been reported as hosts of the fall armyworm, including corn, alfalfa, cotton, soybeans, and most vegetable crops.

As the name indicates, fall armyworms are most numerous in late summer or early fall. Usually, reports of fall armyworm damage begin to come in during early August. First reports are usually from south Alabama where there can be three or more generations of the fall armyworm each year. Fall armyworms are susceptible to cold, and are unable to survive even the mildest winters in Alabama. Each year, fall armyworm moths, carried by air currents, make their way from Central and South America. The size and timing of the initial moth flights are two factors that influence the outbreak potential of this pest.

Fall armyworm damage often seems to appear "overnight." Young armyworms don't eat much. Almost all the damage is caused by the oldest caterpillars which eat more than all the other ages put together. Therefore, an infestation may go undetected because of the small size of the caterpillars. Another reason for the sudden appearance of this insect is that the larger fall armyworms will sometimes "march into" (quickly invade) an un-infested area in search of food once an adjacent field has been defoliated. Large armyworms frequently disappear almost as suddenly as they appeared, either burrowing into the ground to pupate or moving on in search of food.

Fall armyworm damage on newly established grasses such as wildlife food plots and newly established fescue can be an even more serious situation. Seedlings of these fall-seeded plants are small when populations of fall armyworm are at seasonal highs. These crops can be severely stunted or killed.

The adult of the fall armyworm is an ash-gray moth with a wing-span of about 1½ inches. Full grown, larvae may be up to 1½ inches long and vary in color from light green to almost black with several stripes along the body. The "face" is marked with a light-colored inverted "Y." Just behind the head, on the back of the caterpillar, you will see three thin white stripes running the length of the next segment. Sometimes these lines extend along the length of the caterpillar. There are usually small dark spots on the top side of each segment of the body. On the next-to-

last segment, these spots are arranged like the corner points of a square. Development from egg to fully grown larva requires about 2 to 3 weeks. At this point, larvae burrow into the soil and form pupae. The moths emerge in about 10 to 14 days.

To check an area where fall armyworm populations are suspected, use soap flushes to bring larvae to the top of the sod. A simple mixture of 2 tablespoons of lemon-scented dishwashing detergent in 1 gallon of water works very well. Another easily detectable sign of armyworms is the presence of flocks of birds (especially cattle egrets) feeding in pastures or hay fields. Closely examine areas where birds are congregating.

Remember, small fall armyworms are much easier to kill than larger ones. Control can usually be accomplished with an application of carbaryl (for example, Sevin XLR) or other available products. Apply insecticides early or late in the day, because fall armyworm larvae are most active at these times. Apply sprays by ground in a minimum of 30 to 40 gallons of water per acre. Control of large larvae, more than $\frac{3}{4}$ inch, will be less successful. Or if you can wait, they should all be gone after the first frost.