



Season 2 Episode 4 – Turf Insects

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Speaker 3:

Welcome to the Farming Basics Podcast with Olivia Fuller. We'll have sustainable farming tips from growers across the state and extension specialists at Auburn University.

Olivia Fuller:

Welcome back. Back. It's your host, Olivia Fuller, and we are here today with our stand-in co-host, Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer. And we're going to be interrogating Dr. Joshua Weaver about pest and turf. So hello, Katelyn.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

Hi, Olivia. Thanks for having me. And for those of you who are not familiar with me, I co-host the Alabama Crops Report podcast, but I also cover turf. And so I'm here with Olivia and Josh who is in horticulture and has background in turf. So we're going to tag team this episode and talk about turf insects.

Dr. Josh Weaver:

Yeah, that's right. So I'm Josh Weaver and I'm a lecturer in the Department of Horticulture and have a background in turf and do research in turf now as well. So thanks for having me.

Olivia Fuller:

So insects in turf. What are the most concerning ones here in the south?

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

Well, we have a lot, probably our most notorious is the fall armyworm for those of us who were in anywhere in the US and Canada, really in 2021 last year, it was the year of the fall armyworm. And so that's probably our most consistent and devastating pest in turf in Alabama. Would you agree?

Dr. Josh Weaver:

Yes, I would agree. I've seen yards eaten up by a fall armyworm overnight, and customers panicking, so.

Olivia Fuller:

Which ones do they like best, though? I know some people did not get any armyworms and then their neighbor's yard was completely eradicated.

Dr. Josh Weaver:

They love Bermuda grass.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah. And they're really good at finding the welfare fertilized, well irrigated, lush green lawns. And so yeah, you can certainly see your neighbor's lawn can be eaten up and yours may be completely clean. And part of that may also be just where the adult moths ended up from the wind or flying and landed and lay their eggs and you just got the short end of the stick. And then overnight, like their name implies, they came through like an army and your lawn is gone.

Olivia Fuller:

But they come in as moths.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yes. Yep. So we have, they don't over winter here in Alabama, the adult moths over winter down in Texas, in Florida, and every spring they start their journey up here. And along the way they may lay eggs and you'll probably start seeing fall armyworm eggs in early summer, late spring. The females really like to lay them on flat surfaces, so siding of your house, kids' play scapes, siding of pools, anything outside. And so you will be alerted by those fuzzy white egg masses.

Olivia Fuller:

So spraying your yard preemptively isn't necessarily going to kill the eggs because they're probably not even laid there.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

There. Correct. And that's a terrible idea for lots of reasons. So they're not even hatched yet, so you won't kill them. And then what you're going to do is if you spray, you're going to kill all the beneficials and deter other beneficial things like rodents and birds that can eat the eggs. So we usually see about 80% mortality just naturally with eggs from predation. And so once you bring in insecticides before they're needed, you're killing off all the good bugs and making your problem worse.

Olivia Fuller:

So save your money and the bugs at the same time.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah, save your money, save the bugs, grab a hose and you can just spray the egg masses. You can scrape them off and they will die. You can squish them. You can step on them. They're so much easier to control when they're eggs that are not moving.

Olivia Fuller:

Treat it like bubble wrap.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

Exactly ooh, yeah.

Dr. Josh Weaver:

I like that bubble wrap.

Olivia Fuller:

So the armyworms love Bermuda grass. Are there any other pest that have a favorite grass that may be homeowners could steer clear of planting if they wanted to avoid the big major pests?

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

That's a great question. So Josh, what type of grasses do we have here in Alabama?

Dr. Josh Weaver:

Starting around on the coast, you'll see, I mean, you can see centipede, St. Augustine. You can grow Bermuda grass and Zoysia grass in that area. And as we move up more north of state here in the central where we're at, Bermuda and Zoysia seem to be the favorites. You'll see St. Augustine and Centipede [inaudible 00:04:05]-

Olivia Fuller:

Favorites of homeowners or favorites of the pests?

Dr. Josh Weaver:

Favorites of homeowners.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

Well, I'll chime in with the pest here. So we're talking about St. Augustine, that's a favorite of Chinch bugs.

Dr. Josh Weaver:

Chinch bugs. Yes, that's correct. Yes.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

Chinch bugs are true bugs with piercing sucking mouth parts that will suck the nutrients and sap out of your grass. And you'll see yellowing and some purpling from they have some toxins in their saliva that changes the color of the grass and eventually kills it.

Olivia Fuller:

And is that what I call a spittlebug that leaves behind that trail of...?

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

No, those are two different types of true bugs. And so we have the chinch bug, which has a black and white checkered pattern on their back as adults. And then the two-lined spittlebug, because we are very creative entomologist, it has two red lines on its body as an adult. And the nymphs are enclosed in those tiny little spit wads that they produce that kind of frothy liquid that protects them as they're in their nymphal stage. So there are two different types of bugs, and I think it's spittlebugs prefer centipede grass.

Dr. Josh Weaver:

Centipede grass, yeah. They're an issue in centipede grass. And the problem we have on the turf side as far as like centipede and St. Augustine is concerned is mainly centipede it's more of a tough turf to grow up in this area anyway. Especially in the central part of the state. So we don't want to throw a lot of products at it because it's already, it struggles through our winters a lot. Where, like I said, it prefers more along the coastline where weather stays a little bit warmer. So if we have centipede here in the north part or in the central part of the state, we have to treat it with more care. And so we do have these insect problems. Trying to treat it becomes more problematic than if we were on the coastal part of the state.

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Olivia Fuller:

And what about the Northern parts?

Dr. Josh Weaver:

Yeah, the northern part of the state if you get up very part of the north state, you could have more of a cool season turf, like a fescue or something like that, or bluegrass. But Bermuda and Zoysia can grow in those areas. Pretty much that's what you would see from central to the north part of the state. You really don't see much centipede and St. Augustine in the north part of the state just because it can't handle the winters in the northern part of the state as opposed to the southern part.

Olivia Fuller:

So those are the easiest to maintain. Fairly pest resistant?

Dr. Josh Weaver:

There are some pest resistant cultivars of turf grass, St. Augustine. There's four varieties that are pest resistant to the chinch bugs, but we really don't have too many varieties in Bermuda. And Zoysia and other turf that are resistant to pests have heard research has been done on those, but they've not released them yet.

Olivia Fuller:

So spraying could maybe mitigate some of the help control some of the pest. But you mentioned before, maybe avoid spraying and seeing the nature just take its course.

Dr. Josh Weaver:

Yeah. There are cultural practices too, and this goes along with any type of crop we're doing, but from a home lawn standpoint. Mowing practices, irrigation practices, thatch practices as far as how thick is your thatch below the turf grass and stuff like that. So those cultural practices can be taken into account that hopefully mitigate the pest issues.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

And it's simple things too. Sometimes if you have your grass too tall or you have a bunch of weeds, that's a great hiding place for adult mosquitoes. And so you have to remember that your lawn and your turf is a big ecosystem with a ton of diversity and insects. And we want to make it welcoming for the good ones, the predators, the parasitoids, the birds, the pollinators, and make it unwelcoming for the pests. But we know pests are mobile, they'll move in. But if we have a lawn that support the diversity of insects and wildlife, they're at the ready to feed on caterpillars or armyworm eggs or anything that may be a problem for you.

Olivia Fuller:

What are the steps that you tell a homeowner to look towards for implementing and just practices to help?

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

So I think the easiest thing is just to diversify and have different textures. So when you think of textures, you could have rocks or mulch or pine straw, or instead of having a full lawn of turf, throw in some native plantings. And so the more diversity in materials and textures and kind of comfy, cozy hiding places for those wolf spiders to hang out, that's going to start to make your lawn more inviting. And then you throw in native plants and colors and blooms, and then you're off and running.

Olivia Fuller:

So that's making the yard much more resilient then?

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah, because we're going to have migratory pests in the southeast. We have a ton of things that want to eat all the plants, but it's all about creating an ecosystem that can withstand some pest damage, whether it's insects or diseases or even extreme weather events. But creating a system that can recover and provide that free control for you. So you're not doing the work, spending the money or applying chemicals.

Olivia Fuller:

So kind of just planning beforehand instead of going out and buying Roundup immediately, as soon as you see the first armyworm marching across.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yes, exactly.

Olivia Fuller:

Have a plan in place and make sure that your yard is ready for that. And it looks prettier too. I see a lot of just the American white picket fence with lawns kind of taking a turn and implementing a lot of those beautiful native habitats and creating that diversity that's pleasant for the eye. But also clearly for the bugs too.

Dr. Josh Weaver:

That's what I like to see in landscapes is native plants around the house and out in the lawn. And really just using the lawn as a place to have kids play on the lawn, dogs use the lawn, and stuff like that. But definitely having those plants that bring in the native pollinators and such. The lawns that I've seen that sometimes have less pest issues in their turf as opposed to those that just have wall-to-wall turf and no plants nearby.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

And you have a background in landscaping, right Josh?

Dr. Josh Weaver:

Yes.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

So what are some of your favorite native plants that really will thrive here in Alabama?

Dr. Josh Weaver:

Yeah, so I really like native grasses, muhly grasses. There's several of them, like Loropetalums, Abelias, pollinators, love glossy Abelias. Basically butterfly bushes are good. And a lot of our annuals and perennials, lantana, dahlias and such like that. So there's a lot of diversity as far as plants are concerned. A lot of different bloom times. We pretty much can have blooms year round if it's planned appropriately, and it's just neat to see the insects frolicking through the native plants and bushes.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

Spoken like a true entomologist.

Dr. Josh Weaver:

Well, I'm trying to pick it up over here a little bit.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

Come into the lights.

Olivia Fuller:

Well, I think this was very helpful because most of the episodes are geared towards farmers, but I mean, just about everyone has some sort of yard to work with here. So this I think will be utilized for a lot of people in the state. Thanks for coming on.

Dr. Josh Weaver:

Yeah, thanks for having me.

Dr. Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah, thanks so much. This was great.

Speaker 3:

This has been a production of Alabama extension at Auburn University.