

COLUMNS

Identify pests first to stop damage to lawns, trees and gardens

Campbell Vaughn Augusta Chronicle

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Key Points

- Pests can range from insects and weeds to mammals and fungi.
 - Maintaining healthy plants and lawns is the best defense against pests and weeds.
 - Choosing plants that are less palatable to local wildlife can help prevent damage.
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So many battles to be fought around the home and in the landscape. Garden bandits, leaf munchers, plant pirates, and bloodsuckers are just a few of the names I can come up with for what is commonly known as a “pest”.

A pest around the home is such a wide topic because it can apply to so many broad categories, including insects, weeds, fungi, mollusks, viruses, nematodes, mammals, arachnids, or my sister. Fighting pests can be challenging on many levels, but knowing what you are up against is always the best way to start.

I get countless calls and emails trying to figure out why something is happening to my trees, shrubs, grass, and vegetables, and finding the culprit can be tough.

One of the most common questions I get during the spring and summer is why are my plant leaves turning black? Clients will tell me that there is some type of ashy fungus all over the plant, and they want to know what fungicide spray they should use. My reply is yes, you do have a fungus, but it is caused by an insect.

The insect will attach to the floral victim, suck on its juices, and then secrete a sugary substance all over the place called honeydew. The sticky carbohydrate-fueled insect poop (honeydew) will then grow a mold called sooty mold that looks exactly like soot from a bonfire.

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I immediately tell folks, "Get rid of the insect, and the fungus will go away." This is very common on gardenias with white flies and crape myrtles with crape myrtle bark scale. Knowing the source is critical for fighting pests.

More: [How to fight invasive plants and pests that threaten landscapes](#)

There are also plenty of ways we could just avoid the inevitable. If you live near rivers, streams, wooded areas, or out in the country, you are going to have four-legged pests.

Deer and rabbits are there whether you like them or not. And they are going to eat what they think tastes best.

When your garden plant list includes hostas, daylilies, or pansies, you are doomed. Those three garden favorites are also the filet mignon on the menu for these pesky mammals. I can also tell you to try something

like lantana, loropetalum, or spreading plum yew, which are not as palatable to your wood-dwelling uninvited guests, but if deer are hungry, they are going to eat whatever they can find.

I live in golf course country, and people love their grass. A beautiful lawn can be gorgeous, but getting your turf perfectly manicured is not an easy task.

Turf grass likes a neutral pH, and in areas like mine, our soil is usually on the acidic side. That means we constantly need to add lime. If we don't add lime, grass doesn't absorb the nutrients it needs and doesn't thrive.

Some grasses like a lot of nitrogen, and too much nitrogen in other turf grasses will put them into rapid decline.

When any plant is weakened, it is subject to infestation. These can include fungus, insects, and the one thing that is easily the most prevalent pest I deal with, weeds. Healthy lawns mean thick, dense grass. Those dense mats of turf help choke out weeds and keep the constant barrage of seeds flying in the wind or coming off your neighbor's kid's lawnmower when he cuts the grass in every yard in the neighborhood.

When we do have weed issues, we can either hand-pull (which 99% of people hate doing) or we can use chemicals to selectively kill the weed in question. The problem is that one herbicide will kill this (insert weed name here) in this type of grass (insert type of grass here), while the other type of herbicide will not kill the weed in another scenario.

It can be tough, but you need to positively identify the weed so you can target it specifically for the type of turf you have.

It all gets complicated. Preemergence herbicides can get the weeds before they start, but the timing of the application is critical and is a general weed preventative measure, not a silver bullet, and there are no silver bullets in weed control. The best prevention is a good, healthy turf.

Identify the problem before battling the problems.