



## Moles

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener

Moles live almost entirely underground, so you are not likely to ever see them. What you will see are the unique aboveground ridges that moles make as they tunnel searching for food. But unlike other underground critters such as gophers and voles, the moles are not eating your precious plant roots – instead they are searching for worms, insects, and those fat, white grubs that eventually emerge from the soil as beetles and bugs. June bugs, billbugs, and chafer beetles are the names of a few.

Sometimes plant roots are disturbed by the moles digging, but you can minimize any permanent damage to them by pressing the ridges back down and watering the area. I admit that their ridges do make mowing a lawn harder.



The mole is a small insect-eating furry mammal, which contrary to popular belief is not part of the rodent family. They have cylindrical bodies with slender, pointed snouts and short, sparsely haired tails. Their limbs are also short and paddle-like. Moles typically have one litter of 3-4 young per year. Because moles are antisocial, you will find only one mole per tunnel, except during the breeding season, which occurs in late winter-early spring.

If you have mole tunnels and you are finding dying plants or bulbs you may actually have a vole problem. Voles are mice-like rodents that feed on the roots of many garden plants and they use mole tunnels to avoid predators. You can trap voles with mouse traps baited with peanut butter or apples. Set the traps near the vole hole; put a box over the hole to encourage them to emerge from the hole.



As with most small mammals, mole populations are cyclic. Higher than normal rainfall will cause a temporary increase in their numbers and activity. The extra moisture allows grubs to stay closer to the surface and makes the soil easier to dig so more babies survive to adulthood and more tunneling occurs.

Yes, they do sometimes make annoying mounds and ridges in your lawn and yard, but moles are also beneficial, feeding on grubs and stirring mineral rich subsoil up into the root-zone. And their tunneling aerates the soil, which in turn can improve plant growth and reduce soil erosion.

But then again moles can cause significant problems and for some home gardeners the number of moles that can be tolerated is usually quite low, and sometimes even zero. As soon as you see an active mound or surface runway, initiate appropriate control actions.

Several methods of control are available, but no single method has proven fail proof, so it may be necessary to use a combination of techniques.

Trapping is the most dependable method of mole control. Moles are active throughout the year and can be trapped at any time. In California two traps are common: the harpoon type and the scissor-jaw type. In general gopher traps won't catch a mole. The trap must be set to catch the mole underground.

Before setting mole traps, determine which runways are currently in use. Moles dig a system of deep tunnels that are more or less permanently used as well as a network of surface runs used for feeding. Moles are more likely to be trapped in the deep runways, which they reuse over and over. Consult the UC Pest Note on Moles for specific details: <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74115.html>

Many home remedies have been suggested as repellents to solve mole problems, but research doesn't support their effectiveness. Toxic baits that mimic the moles natural food source (such as Kaput Mole Gel Bait and Talpirid) are more effective than grain baits and appear to be a viable alternative for mole control.

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