

Castor Bean Plant Won't Kill Lawn Moles

Dear Plant Doctor: Please tell me how I can rid my centipede lawn of moles? I have heard that a castor bean plant in the yard will keep moles away but I have no idea where to obtain a castor bean plant or seeds? Can you help?

—Fayetteville
ANSWER: Mole traps are the best control for moles.

Moles feed on insects, worms and other small critters living in the soil. Mole damage in lawns is more of a nuisance problem than an actual threat to the health of the grass.

Castor-bean (*Ricinus communis*) is a unique tall annual or perennial plant with poisonous seed. But this plant has no special attributes to rid your lawn of moles (even if you did really want to plant this 6-to-8-foot-tall plant in your lawn). For homes in or near heavily forested areas, moles will naturally find their way into your lawn while foraging for worms, insects or grubs.

Although many turfgrass specialists blame grub infestations for mole invasion, getting rid of the grubs may not get rid of moles. Heavy insecticide use rarely cures the mole problem, and more likely than not, leads to other more severe insect problems. In addition, I rarely observed sufficient grub populations in southeastern North Carolina home lawns to warrant grub treatment. I suspect moles are feeding on earthworms or other small insects in most lawns in southeastern North Carolina.

I am sending you an excellent publication, "Mole Control-Zoology Note 18", that will help you better understand this small insectivorous rodent and describes the best method of trapping them.

Dear Plant Doctor: This year I had a problem with tomatoes that I had never encountered before and cannot find anyone that knows the answer. I planted "Better Boy" and had a fine early crop, then the fruit started to ripen on the top first, instead of on the bottom. The fruit on the lower portion of the plant remained a white or very light green color and was very hard, even when the tomato turned a full red color.

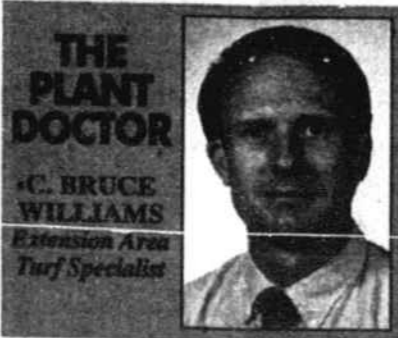
I found that on cutting the tomato that they were an opaque white throughout with only a red skin. I am enclosing a picture of the condition and will greatly appreciate any help you can give me.

—Long Beach
ANSWER: You have a most interesting problem. I have never seen a disease that produces symptoms exactly like your plants exhibited. After consulting with Dr. Harry Duncan at North Carolina State University, I came to some conclusions.

The problem is related to one or a combination of the following: a plant virus (like tobacco mosaic virus), insufficient potassium in the soil coupled with high temperatures, or water-logged soil. Dr. Duncan told me reports were coming in that implicated the sweet potato whitefly in causing similar symptoms but further research was needed to confirm this connection. I recommend you soil test and amend your garden with the required nutrients and pay special attention to avoiding virus infection during planting next season.

If any readers have experienced this problem, please let me know.

Dear Plant Doctor: I have enclosed the beautiful red leaf of a plant that seems to grow wild around my house. What is this



THE PLANT DOCTOR
 C. BRUCE WILLIAMS
 Extension Area
 Turf Specialist

ANSWER: The plant you sent me is called Staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*). Staghorn sumac is a native plant cultivated in American gardens since the 1600's and is especially well suited to droughty, infertile soils.

Staghorn sumac is from a very notorious plant family, the Anacardiaceae, whose cousins include poison ivy and the cashew. "Dissecta" or "Lacinata" are two beautiful cultivated forms of Staghorn sumac with highly dissected leaves that are sometimes seen in

the nursery trade.

These plants are a superb selection for difficult to establish for low-maintenance sites on banks, cuts or hills. Sumac suckers freely from the base and can be invigorated by cutting the woody stems to the ground in late winter. Plants can be propagated from root cuttings or seed.

Dear Plant Doctor: I have enclosed a leaf and stem of a small tree planted in the yard by the previous owner. Is the plant worth keeping?

—Southport
ANSWER: Absolutely yes! This

versatile member of the rose family is called a Washington Hawthorn (*Crataegus phaenopyrum*). The Washington Hawthorn is a beautiful small thorny tree that you will want to keep in your garden. The tree is a close relative to the crabapple and produces dozens of clusters of small red berries in late fall and early winter. The contrast of the red fruit against the gray bark in the dreariness of winter is quite beautiful. In addition, the berries are a wonderful food for migrating and overwintering birds.

If you need to move and plant this or any other small woody tree, the months of November and December are a great time to do so.

Send your gardening questions and comments to the Plant Doctor, P.O. Box 109, Bolivia NC 28422.

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