

PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

Oyster Bay Winners

Jennie and John Gregory of 516 Woods Court, Oyster Bay, are one of four Sea Trail Plantation Yard of the Month winners for May. The couple has a small vegetable garden along with peach, pear and fig trees, flowers and shrubbery.

Does My Lawn Have Ground Pearls?

Dear Plant Doctor: I have circular dead areas in my centipede lawn and have done everything recommended by Extension brochures. My neighbor says I have ground pearls in my lawn. What are ground pearls and how do I get rid of them?

Dear Plant Doctor: I have dead areas in my centipede lawn that grow larger each year. I routinely use insecticides and grub control but that seems to do no good. I left a sample of sod at the Wilmington office for you to examine. What is the problem?

Dear Plant Doctor: The lawn care service just told me I had ground pearls and that my lawn was doomed to die. What is going on? I have never heard of an insect you could not kill. What is my best next move?

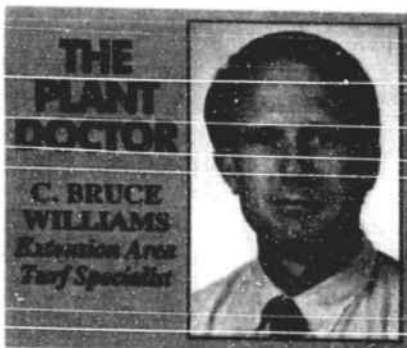
Answer: If Stephen King were to write a horror novel about a lawn insect pest, ground pearl would be the lead character. All of the above lawns have a common pest: ground pearl.

The ground pearl (*Margarodes meridionalis* or related species) is a scale-like insect that has been recorded on warm season turfgrasses from southern California to southeastern North Carolina. Although extremely rare in many southern areas, the ground pearl is very common in the sandy soils of southeastern North Carolina.

The immature ground pearl (nymph form) attaches to and extracts juices from the grass root. Damage from this insect is most apparent during dry spells of when the grass is under stress from nematode infestation, disease, shade or poor soil fertility. Damage first appears as irregular to round-shaped yellow blotches (two to three feet in diameter) in the grass sward. These blotches eventually turn brown and die.

Severely infested areas will have large patches in which no grass or any other vegetation will grow.

Only a handful of scientists have ever studied the ground pearl. The first comprehensive study was conducted at N.C. State University by William Spink in 1958 on home lawns in Wilmington. Spink found



ish-white and 1/4 inch or smaller in diameter. Nymphs over-winter in the pearl stage. Females reach maturity in the late spring and emerge from their cysts.

The life cycle of the ground pearl is believed to normally take one year, but scientists report that if disturbed, the nymph can go dormant and live up to 17 years (or longer) in the soil before emerging. Winged male ground pearls have been observed emerging from cysts, but are extremely rare and their significance and role is not known.

Controlling Ground Pearls
No effective control measure exists for ground pearl.

A vast number of insecticides have been evaluated for ground pearl but no product has ever been shown effective for long-term control. The encysted nymph or pearl is nearly impervious to any insecticide product.

The female and newly hatched nymph are susceptible to most insecticides, but because emergence and egg-laying is spread over two months, few commercially available insecticides seem to have the persistence needed for long-term kill.

One researcher in Alabama reported that plots that were not treated with insecticide showed the greatest reduction in ground pearl population. This corresponds to some entomologists' observation that the common ant is the major predator of the ground pearl, thus any product that harms ant populations increases the ground pearl population. Insecticides will not control ground pearl; if anything, they can make the infestation in your lawn worse.

The best you can do is be sure your lawn is well-watered, properly fertilized and mowed, and that your lawngrass is maintained in a healthy and vigorous condition. I have never seen nor read reports of ground pearl on carpetgrass or bahiagrass. In severe infestations, the utilization of these grasses or other ground cover (e.g. English ivy, Asiatic jasmine, etc.) may be necessary to maintain a ground cover on your yard.

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

no controls for the insect but did record and document the life cycle of this critter.

I have observed ground pearls feeding on centipede grass, zoysiagrass, bermudagrass and St. Augustine grass, although damage is usually most severe on centipede grass. To check for ground pearl in your lawn, take a four-inch diameter plug (three to four inches deep) soil sample at the edge of the infested patch and take the sample (in a plastic bag) to your county N.C. Cooperative Extension Office.

Ground Pearl Life Cycle
Female ground pearls emerge from the "pearl" stage in early summer—May to July. Females are dark red to pinkish, wingless and about 1/4 to 1/2 inch long and vaguely resemble a miniature slug. The adult females do not appear to feed or have the ability to do so.

Once in the soil, the female secretes a cottony waxy coat in which she lays approximately 100 eggs. Female ground pearls are "born pregnant" with fertile eggs that do not need the male contribution.

Slender six-legged cigar-shaped nymphs emerge from the eggs in mid-summer and infest nearby grass rootlets. Once the young insect nymphs initiate feeding, the familiar waxy spherical shape (pearl) develops.

As the nymphs grow, they shed their old skins and grow a new one, although all "skins" stay attached to the insect. Ground pearls may shed their waxy skins 15 times before reaching maturity. This "skin" makes the ground pearl nearly impervious to any soil-applied insecticide.

Pearls are hard, globular, yellow-

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