

Keeping things healthy

Improve soil quality for a better lawn

A lush, green lawn can vastly improve a home's curb appeal. Thick, healthy grass indicates that homeowners care enough about their properties to invest the time, effort and money to make them beautiful.

According to the landscaping tool company Troy-Bilt, soil fertility is the foundation of healthy lawns. In fact, the quality of the soil is essential whether one is growing acres of grass, potted plants or vegetable garden beds. No matter which type of soil a homeowner is working with, there are various ways to make it better.

REMOVE THATCH

Thatch is a tightly knotted layer of leaves, grass roots, stems, and other debris that accumulates between the grass blades and the soil. Too much thatch can hinder the movement of water, air and nutrients into the soil. According to organic fertilizer company Organo-Lawn, thatch often occurs if the production of dead organic material in the lawn exceeds the ability of the microorganisms in the soil to break down that organic matter. A half-inch of thatch is normal. If thatch gets too thick, it will need to be removed. The home improvement resource DIY Network says dethatching can take place in the summer, fall and winter using a thatching rake.

AERATE

A lawn aerator will create holes in the soil. This can improve drainage and encourage worms and helpful microorganisms that require oxygen to thrive in the soil. The Briggs & Stratton Company says the best time to aerate a lawn is during the growing season when the grass can heal and fill in any holes, such as spring and fall. Aeration can help develop deeper grass roots for a healthier lawn.

TEST AND AMEND SOIL

A great lawn has loamy soil, which has a key ratio of clay, silt and sand. Silt is a granular material of a size between sand and clay that originates from quartz and feldspar. It is the most fertile of the three types of soil components. Sand does not retain water, but it helps to create spaces in the soil that permit air to circulate. Clay particles are small and bind together tightly, but clay is naturally nutrient-rich. The home improvement site BobVila.com says loamy soil should have equal parts sand and silt and half as much clay.

Signs that voles are invading your garden and yard

All sorts of uninvited guests can compromise the look and vitality of a garden. Some gardens are trampled by foot traffic, while others are plagued with weeds. Still others are plagued by small, tunnel-building rodents known as voles.

Correctly diagnosing issues is essential to maintaining a healthy garden, and identifying vole infestations is no exception.

Voiles are often confused with moles. While they do bear some similarities, namely that both travel through lawns and gardens via tunnels, voiles and moles are not one and the same. In fact, moles are not even rodents.

The Old Farmer's Almanac notes that voiles eat mainly vegetarian diets. That makes vegetable gardens prime targets for these small rodents that some mistake for mice. But Pests.org, a comprehensive resource for anyone looking to learn about pests and the threats they pose, notes that voiles' eyes and ears are considerably smaller than the eyes and ears



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of mice. In addition, voiles' tails are much shorter than the tails on mice.

Correctly diagnosing issues is essential to maintaining a healthy garden, and identifying vole infestations is no exception. The following are some signs that typically indicate a lawn or garden has been infested with voiles.

- **Shallow tunnels throughout the property:** Voiles create shallow tunnels between one and two inches wide, and these tunnels can typically be found all over the lawn. Grass stems and blades are part of voiles' diets, so don't just look to the garden for signs of vole infestation.

- **Markings on bark and plants:** Pests.org notes that voiles may leave small gnaw marks on bark and plants. A

careful inspection of trees and other plants may be necessary to uncover this symptom.

- **Partially eaten root vegetables:** Voiles may eat root vegetables like carrots and potatoes by pulling them down into their tunnels. The result is partially eaten vegetables in the garden.

- **Damaged trees and shrubs:** Voiles don't limit their victims to grass and root vegetables. Young trees and shrubs that are leaning over may have fallen victim to vole infestations.

Homeowners can employ various strategies to control and prevent vole infestations. But first they must be certain the unwanted guests tunneling their way through their lawns and gardens are, in fact, voiles.

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