The Army of Fall

It is finally starting to look and feel like fall with colorful leaves, cool nights, college football, fall armyworms, crisp apples, collard greens, and let us not forget the county fair. The heat of the summer is hopefully over, and soon we will be thinking about mums and pumpkins. All these signs of cool weather make this one happy Yankee. But wait a second… fall armyworms?

Let me tell you a little story…

It was the Sunday before Labor Day at the Roach house. Kerrie and her husband Zack had just returned from watching their alma mater win their opening football game in Clemson, S.C. Kerrie opened the back door to let their dog Bella outside when she noticed something strange. The concrete patio was covered with little black “worms.” Kerrie thought, “Hmm, that’s not good. I’ll have to check it out tomorrow.” The next morning she awoke to let little Bella out again, and this time Kerrie walked out into the yard. What she saw was an infestation. The bermudagrass plots that Zack was meticulously caring for were stripped. The crabgrass and other weeds were even gone. What was left was a blanket of brown stalks with thousands of fall armyworms waving their flags in victory!

The story does not end there, but just know that in the end Kerrie and Zack prevailed, and there were no fall armyworms to wave the white flag of surrender.

Fall armyworms are a fairly new pest for turfgrasses, only surfacing in damaging populations for the past 15 or so. The pests overwinter in Florida and the Gulf coast as a moth and migrate to North Carolina beginning in June. They will continue arriving through November. The moths arrive here and lay eggs. Each moth can lay upwards of 1,000 eggs. Approximately 10 days later, the larvae emerge from the egg and begin feeding on your lawn, pasture, corn, soybeans, or pretty much anything green. After about two or three weeks, the larvae will burrow into the soil and pupate into the adult moth. The cycle then starts over. Scientists claim that there can be as many as four generations of the fall armyworm in North Carolina each year.

The fall armyworm larvae are approximately one inch long and can be identified by the distinctive Y marking on the head and black stripe down each side of their body. The adult moth...
is mottled gray and brown with white hind wings and black front wings. It has a wingspan of about 1 1/2 half inches.

Fall armyworms like newly seeded and sodded areas. They particularly enjoy bermudagrass but will feed on anything that is green, including your flowers. Well-watered and fertilized grass is frequently targeted. When one food source has been depleted, the armyworms will indeed “march” to a new one.

The accepted threshold for fall armyworms in turfgrass is one larva per square foot of lawn. If you suspect your lawn is under attack, like mine was, and wish to wage war on the fall armyworms, here is a method for destruction:

Prior to treatment, mow the lawn as usual and provide a light irrigation. Treat later in the day with a product containing acephate or pyrethroids that is labeled for fall armyworm control. Make sure to read and follow all instructions on the insecticide, as the label is the law.

Hopefully, you will never have to declare war on the fall armyworm. But just remember, there is hope! Careful monitoring and quick action can save your turfgrass. If you have any questions about fall armyworms or pesticide recommendations, please contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, by E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu or by phone at (910) 671-3276 or visit Robeson County Center’s website at robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.