

Grubby grubs ruining Metro lawns

Crows, raccoons, skunks dig up turf to get tender juicy morsels

BY DAMIAN INWOOD, THE PROVINCE APRIL 15, 2010



Christine Filer stands Wednesday on her West 27th Avenue lawn, damaged by the European chafer beetle.

Photograph by: Ward Perrin, PNG, The Province

Thousands of Lower Mainland lawns are long gone, thanks to the European chafer beetle, an underground bug that's chomping its way across the region.

And millions of the chubby, white, 2.5-centimetre grubs -- enough to supply reality-TV show *Survivor* for a lifetime -- are to blame.

"This thing has become a major disaster," Ian Wright, owner of Surrey-based Nutri-Lawn, said Wednesday. "We're now up to damage in the millions of dollars. You see lawns that look like a Rototiller attacked them."

The problem is not the beetles themselves but the grubs that grow from the eggs they lay. They eat grass roots and then form a tasty snack for raccoons, skunks and crows, which dig them out of the ground.

Wright said the infestation has spread from Vancouver, Burnaby and New Westminster to Coquitlam and Port Coquitlam and has crossed the Fraser River into Delta.

So far, the problem hasn't spread to any farmland production areas, said Tracy Hueppelsheuser, an entomologist for B.C.'s Plant Health Unit in Abbotsford.

Ontario farmers have suffered losses because of the beetle, Hueppelsheuser said.

"Crops listed as damaged by chafer include winter wheat, corn ginseng, highbush blueberries, pasture and hay," she said. "These crops are all grown in southern B.C., and chafer presents a serious risk to B.C.'s horticulture industry. It has potential for great damage."

Urban communities must be aggressive in trying to stop the spread of the beetle, she said.

For Vancouver resident Christine Filer, the grubs have left a "gross," unsightly, expensive mess in front of her West 27th Avenue home.

"There are millions of them," said the 41-year-old unemployed market analyst.

Filer said she's had an estimate of between \$200 and \$250 just to put down dirt and re-seed the front lawn. If she replaces the lawn, it'll be much more, she added.

Tracy Weldon, the City of Burnaby's environmental services officer, said homeowners should allow their lawns to grow to a "healthy" five to eight centimetres, which helps stop the beetles laying their eggs in the soil after they mate. Grass lawns with a mix of clover are also less attractive to the beetle.

Using pesticides for "cosmetic" purposes is banned in most Lower Mainland municipalities, but biofriendly treatments -- such as using nematodes, microscopic roundworms that destroy the grubs -- are allowed.

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