



CLIENT HANDOUT · NORTH SHORE LAWNS

What's Eating My Lawn?

A field guide to the 11 lawn pests I come across most in Sydney, from the most common down. How to spot each one, the quick checks you can do yourself, what else it could be, and how to fix it without reaching straight for a spray.



Adult beetle · Thomas Mesaglio, CC BY (iNaturalist)



Caterpillar · entophile, CC BY (iNaturalist)



Mole cricket · Rosie Steinberg, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Before you blame a bug

Most brown lawns in Sydney aren't pests at all. Dry spells, dog wee, mowing too low, shade, compacted soil and lawn diseases cause far more brown patches than grubs do. So I always check the easy things first, then go looking for culprits.

Insects leave clues: birds digging, grass that lifts like carpet, chewed leaf tips, moths fluttering up when you walk across the lawn.

The quick list

1. **African black beetle** · root feeder (larvae) and beetle
2. **Curl grubs (other scarab larvae)** · root feeder (larvae)
3. **Lawn armyworm (and common armyworm)** · leaf-chewing caterpillar
4. **Sod webworm (tropical grass webworm)** · leaf-chewing caterpillar
5. **Cutworms** · leaf- and stem-chewing caterpillar
6. **Mole crickets** · burrowing root feeder
7. **Ants** · nest builder
8. **Billbug (La Plata weevil)** · stem and root feeder (larvae)
9. **Couch mite** · microscopic sap feeder
10. **Rhodes grass scale (felted coccid)** · sap-sucking mealybug
11. **Ground pearls** · root-sucking scale insect



Four checks you can do yourself

Soap flush test

Mix 1–2 tablespoons of dishwashing liquid into a bucket (about 2.5–9 L) of water. Pour it over about 1 m² of lawn right at the edge of the damaged patch, ideally in the evening. Watch for 10–15 minutes. Caterpillars, cutworms and mole crickets wriggle up to the surface.

Tug test

Grab a handful of yellowing grass at the edge of a patch and pull. If it lifts like a loose rug with few roots, something is eating the roots. If single stems snap off at the base and are hollow with sawdust-like crumbs inside, think billbug.

Spade check

Cut a spade-sized square of turf on three sides at the edge of the damage and fold it back. Look in the top 5–10 cm of soil for C-shaped white grubs.

Birds and night watch

Lots of birds pecking or digging in one spot is a big hint that grubs or caterpillars are there. A torch walk after dark shows caterpillars feeding and moths around lights.

Common look-alikes

- **Drought:** grass browns evenly, is worst on slopes and near hot paths, and stays anchored when you tug it.
- **Dog urine:** small round dead spots, often with a ring of extra-green grass.
- **Lawn disease:** rings or spots with darker or yellow edges, often after warm humid weather, and no chewing or grubs.
- **Mowing too low:** brown stubble right after a mow, on bumps and edges.

My lawn-care basics (they beat most pests)

- **Mow high-ish** and often, at the right height for your grass. Never take more than a third off at once.
- **Water deeply and less often** so roots go deep.
- **Aerate** compacted areas in spring, and **dethatch** when the spongy layer builds up.
- **Feed lightly** in the growing season; not too much nitrogen.
- **Choose the right grass** for sun, shade and wear.
- **Let the birds in** and leave a few pests for the predators.

Reading the guide: the coloured month bar shows when each pest is active. The green tags show the lawn types it attacks. Sprays get only a short "if it's bad" note: in a home lawn they are usually the last step, not the first.

1. African black beetle

Heteronychus arator · Root feeder (larvae) and beetle



Adult beetle · Thomas Mesaglio, CC BY

J F M A M J J A S O N D
Couch Kikuyu Buffalo Zoysia Recorded mainly on couch and kikuyu; most lawn grasses can be hit.

How to spot it

Damage: Irregular brown patches that look like drought and don't green up after watering. The turf feels spongy and can be rolled back like carpet because the roots are gone. Birds, and sometimes foxes, dig it up looking for grubs.

The culprit: Adults are shiny jet-black beetles, 12–15 mm long, that wander over paths and lawns and fly to lights at night. Larvae are cream C-shaped curl grubs up to about 25 mm with a brown head, three pairs of legs and a darker rear end.

When: Beetles roam and lay eggs in spring (about September–October). Grubs hatch around November and do their damage from December to March. New beetles come out from late summer into autumn.

Check at home

Spade check, Tug test, Birds and night watch (see page 2).

Rule out

- **Drought stress:** Dry grass still has roots and stays anchored when you tug. Grub-eaten turf lifts straight off.
- **Dog urine:** Urine spots are small, round and often have a ring of extra-green grass around the edge.

What I'd do first

- Water deeply and less often so roots go down further and can cope with some feeding.
- Don't overdo the fertiliser in spring; lush, soft turf attracts the beetles.
- Mow at the right height for your grass, not too low, so it stays strong.
- Beneficial nematodes (*Heterorhabditis*) watered into moist soil have given very good control of the grubs in trials.
- Let the magpies, ibis and currawongs dig. Rake and top-dress the holes after.

If it's bad: If you are finding more than a handful of grubs per spade square and the lawn keeps dying back, a registered lawn grub product applied in late spring, when the grubs are small, works better than waiting until autumn.

2. Curl grubs (other scarab larvae)

Scarabaeidae, e.g. *Argentinian scarab* (*Cyclocephala signaticollis*) and *Christmas beetles* (*Anoplognathus*) · Root feeder (larvae)



Argentinian scarab adult · James K. Douch, CC BY-SA



Typical curl grub shape (overseas relative) · Lucas Benaiche, CC BY-SA



Christmas beetle adult · Carl Ramirez, CC BY

J F M A M J J A S O N D
Couch Kikuyu Buffalo Zoysia Any lawn grass.

How to spot it

Damage: Same pattern as African black beetle: yellow then brown patches, turf that lifts like a rug, and birds digging.

The culprit: Fat, cream, C-shaped grubs with six legs near the head and a swollen grey-brown rear. Head colour varies (yellow, brown, red or black). The adults are brown or metallic beetles. The Argentinian scarab is a small brown beetle that swarms to lights on summer nights.

When: Grubs feed through summer and autumn. Beetles fly in late spring and summer.

Check at home

Spade check, Tug test, Birds and night watch (see page 2).

Rule out

- **Drought stress:** Roots stay attached; the grass recovers within a week or two of a good soak.
- **Big compost-eating grubs:** Not every curl grub is a problem. A couple per spade square in a garden bed or compost is normal and mostly feeding on organic matter.

What I'd do first

- Deep, less frequent watering for deep roots.
- Mow a bit higher in summer.
- Aerate compacted lawn in spring so roots can grow down.
- Beneficial nematodes for heavy grub numbers.
- Encourage birds that feed on grubs.

If it's bad: Only treat if you find lots of grubs and the lawn keeps losing ground; a registered lawn grub product timed for small grubs in late spring or early summer.

3. Lawn armyworm (and common armyworm)

Spodoptera mauritia; *Mythimna convecta* · Leaf-chewing caterpillar



Caterpillar · entophile, CC BY



Adult moth · Richard Fuller, CC0



Common armyworm caterpillar · Natasha Taylor, CC BY

J F M A M J J A S O N D
Couch Kikuyu Buffalo Zoysia Couch and kikuyu are favourites; it will eat most lawn grasses.

How to spot it

Damage: Patches that look freshly mown or scalped, ragged chewed leaf tips, and brown areas that spread fast, often overnight and starting from the lawn edge near garden beds. The roots are still fine.

The culprit: Smooth caterpillars up to 30–40 mm, green when small, then grey-brown with pale stripes along the body. They curl into a C when disturbed and hide in the thatch by day. Adults are dull brown moths.

When: Mostly late summer and early autumn (about December–April). There can be two or three generations in a season.

Check at home

Soap flush test, Birds and night watch (see page 2).

Rule out

- **Scalping from the mower:** Scalped grass is cut evenly and shows the same day you mowed. Armyworm damage keeps growing night after night.
- **Drought stress:** Drought browns the whole leaf evenly; armyworm leaves look chewed.

What I'd do first

- Keep the lawn watered and lightly fed so it can regrow; the roots usually survive.
- Mow regularly and dethatch so caterpillars have fewer places to hide by day.
- Check after warm, humid spells in late summer with a soap flush.
- Birds love them. A lawn full of birds in February is worth a look.

If it's bad: If a soap flush brings up lots of caterpillars and the damage is spreading, a registered lawn caterpillar product applied in the evening, then repair with a light feed and water.

4. Sod webworm (tropical grass webworm)

Herpetogramma licarsialis · Leaf-chewing caterpillar



Adult moth · Carl Ramirez, CC BY

J F M A M J J A S O N D
Kikuyu Buffalo Couch Named on kikuyu and buffalo.

How to spot it

Damage: Small brown patches with chewed, ragged blades that join up into bigger bare areas. You may see fine silk and little green droppings in the thatch.

The culprit: Slim greenish-brown caterpillars with dark spots, up to about 25 mm, hiding in silk tunnels in the thatch by day. Adults are pale brown moths that fly up in short hops when you walk across the lawn.

When: Damage is mostly January to April.

Check at home

Soap flush test, Birds and night watch (see page 2).

Rule out

- **Armyworm:** Similar damage. Webworms are thinner, spotted, and live in silk-lined tunnels.
- **Fungal patch disease:** Disease patches often have a darker or yellow ring and no chewed leaves.

What I'd do first

- Dethatch so there's less cover for the caterpillars.
- Keep up water and a light feed through late summer so the grass outgrows the damage.
- Soap flush when you see the moths fluttering over the lawn.

If it's bad: If the soap flush brings up lots of caterpillars, a registered lawn caterpillar product in the evening.



5. Cutworms

Agrotis species · Leaf- and stem-chewing caterpillar



Cutworm caterpillar · Aalbert Rebergen, CC BY



Adult moth · Lawrence Hylton, CC BY

J **F** **M** A M J J A S **O** **N** **D**

Couch **Kikuyu** **Buffalo** **Zoysia** Any lawn grass.

How to spot it

Damage: Small brown patches and grass chewed off at ground level, sometimes with little holes in the turf where caterpillars hide.

The culprit: Plump grey-brown caterpillars up to about 40 mm that curl up tightly when disturbed. They hide in the soil by day. Adults are brown moths that come to lights.

When: Warmer months.

Check at home

Soap flush test, Birds and night watch (see page 2).

Rule out

- **Armyworm:** Cutworms work alone or in small numbers and chew at the base; armyworms come in crowds.

What I'd do first

- Mow and dethatch regularly.
- Water and lightly feed to help regrowth.
- Check at night with a torch.

If it's bad: Small outbreaks rarely need anything. If there are lots, a registered lawn caterpillar product.

6. Mole crickets

Gryllotalpa species · Burrowing root feeder



Mole cricket · Rosie Steinberg, CC BY



Mole cricket · Dave, CC BY

J **F** **M** A M J J A S **O** **N** **D**

Couch **Kikuyu** **Buffalo** **Zoysia** Any lawn grass.

How to spot it

Damage: Raised soft tunnels under the turf, small piles of loose soil and grass that browns and dries because its roots have been cut.

The culprit: Shiny brown crickets about 30–45 mm with huge spade-like front legs for digging. You'll often hear them more than see them: a loud continuous buzz from the lawn at dusk, especially after rain or watering.

When: Most active in summer.

Check at home

Soap flush test (see page 2).

Rule out

- **Ant nests or worm casts:** Ant mounds have ants. Worm casts are small rounded piles with no tunnels.

What I'd do first

- Most lawns live happily with a few. Fill and roll soft tunnels.
- Water deeply and less often rather than every evening; they are most common in well-watered ground.

If it's bad: Only if tunnelling is killing big areas. Talk to me before reaching for a spray.



7. Ants

Several species, e.g. meat ants (*Iridomyrmex purpureus*) · Nest builder



Meat ants on a nest · Thomas Mesaglio, CC BY

J **F** **M** **A** M J J A S **O** **N** **D**

Couch **Kikuyu** **Buffalo** **Zoysia** Any lawn grass.

How to spot it

Damage: Mounds of fine soil that smother the grass, and bare or thin spots where nests are busy.

The culprit: Small ants coming and going from soil mounds or holes in the lawn.

When: Warmer months.

Check at home

Birds and night watch (see page 2).

Rule out

- **Worm casts:** Little rounded piles of moist soil with no ants. They are a good sign.

What I'd do first

- Rake or hose mounds flat.
- Keep the lawn thick so there's less bare ground to nest in.
- Remember ants also eat other lawn pests.

If it's bad: Most ants need no treatment. For a persistent nest in the wrong place, a registered ant bait used to the label.

8. Billbug (La Plata weevil)

Sphenophorus brunnipennis · Stem and root feeder (larvae)



Adult weevil · Joshua S. Martin, CCO

J **F** M A M J J A **S** **O** **N** **D**

Kikuyu **Couch** Mainly kikuyu, sometimes couch.

How to spot it

Damage: Small yellow patches that turn brown and don't respond to watering. Stems snap off easily at the crown and are hollow with sawdust-like crumbs.

The culprit: Adults are dark weevils about 8–12 mm with a long curved snout, often seen walking on paths. Larvae are creamy-white legless grubs with a brown head, inside stems or just below the surface.

When: Adults are active from late August. The worst damage is November to February.

Check at home

Tug test, Spade check (see page 2).

Rule out

- **Dollar spot or other fungal disease:** Disease leaves stems intact. Billbug stems are hollow and break at the crown.
- **Curl grubs:** Curl grubs are C-shaped with legs; billbug larvae have no legs.

What I'd do first

- Water and feed properly so the turf can outgrow mild damage.
- Avoid drought stress over summer.
- Do the tug test in early summer on kikuyu.

If it's bad: If tug tests keep turning up hollow stems, a registered product timed for small larvae in late spring.



9. Couch mite

Aceria cynodoniensis · Microscopic sap feeder

Too small to photograph without a microscope.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

Couch Couch; other mite species occur on kikuyu.

How to spot it

Damage: Couch that goes stunted and tufty: short, bunched leaves forming little "witches' brooms" or rosettes, often worst along edges. Runners stop spreading.

The culprit: Far too small to see without a microscope.

When: Hot, dry weather in summer.

Rule out

- **Herbicide damage:** Spray damage shows up all at once after spraying, often with yellowing; mite tufts build up slowly.
- **Scalping:** Scalped couch is brown and thin, not bunched and tufted.

What I'd do first

- Keep couch watered through hot dry spells.
- Don't overdo nitrogen fertiliser; mites got worse with more nitrogen and less water in trials.
- For bad patches, mow low and bag and remove the clippings.

If it's bad: Get it confirmed first; other mites look similar. Then a registered miticide if it keeps spreading.

10. Rhodes grass scale (felted coccid)

Antonina graminis · Sap-sucking mealybug



Felted sacs on grass stems · CSIRO, Public domain

J F M A M J J A S O N D

Couch **Buffalo** Couch, Queensland blue couch and buffalo are preferred.

How to spot it

Damage: Thin, weak, yellowing grass that slowly dies out in patches, usually where the lawn is already stressed.

The culprit: Small white woolly or felty sacs about 2–3 mm stuck at the base of stems, under leaf sheaths and at the nodes of runners. Ants often visit them.

When: Worse in warm, dry, stressed times.

Check at home

Tug test (see page 2).

Rule out

- **Drought stress:** Pull back the leaf sheaths: drought leaves no white sacs.

What I'd do first

- Don't mow too low.
- Water properly so the grass isn't stressed.
- Check new turf on delivery; it spreads on clippings, mowers and new turf.

If it's bad: Hard to clear completely. Good lawn care is the main fix; talk to me before spraying.

11. Ground pearls

Margarodidae · Root-sucking scale insect



Ground pearl cysts (South American relative) · mirmeleon, CC BY

J **F** **M** A M J J A S O N **D**

Couch **Kikuyu** **Buffalo** **Zoysia** Any grass, warm-season types mostly.

How to spot it

Damage: Irregular yellow, thin and dead patches that look exactly like drought and don't recover, usually in sandy soil.

The culprit: Tiny shiny round cysts, like little golden or pearly beads, among the roots and soil.

When: All year in the soil; damage shows in hot dry spells.

Check at home

Spade check (see page 2).

Rule out

- **Drought stress:** Sift soil from the edge of the patch through your fingers and look for tiny pearls.

What I'd do first

- Water during dry spells and use a wetting agent in sandy soil.
- Balanced feeding, fix compaction, mow at the right height.
- In bad spots, zoysia and some couch varieties cope better.

If it's bad: Sprays do very little against ground pearls. Good lawn care is the fix.



Not sure what's eating your lawn?

Bring me a photo, or I'll come and do the tug test and soap flush with you. I'll tell you what's going on, and the fix is usually better lawn care, not more chemicals.

If you're not sure what's eating your lawn, get in touch for a quote.

Sources

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