

## Preventing and treating leather jackets

### What are leather jackets?

Leather jackets are a common lawn pest. It is thought that leather jackets are particularly attracted to fresh, new turf. They are the larvae of the crane fly (daddy long-legs) and live just below the surface of the lawn until they emerge as adult flies during August-October. The adult flies then lay eggs and the new grubs start feasting, starting the cycle again.

They are black/brown in colour, so can sometimes be difficult to see in the lawn, and it's often not until they have damaged the lawn that an infestation is identified. Birds pecking at the soil in winter, and at lawns in spring and early summer, are another sign of leather jackets. Larger predators may also dig them up from the lawn.

### What are the symptoms of a lawn with leather jackets?

The grubs feed primarily on the roots of the grass, so often there is no visible early sign of damage until the lawn starts to wither, thin out and die back. It is not uncommon for leather jackets to suddenly appear on hard surfaces during wet weather, such as adjoining paving or paths.

### When do they usually appear?

They are most numerous after a warm, wet and mild autumn, which favours survival of the tiny, newly hatched leatherjackets. Though they can start feeding on the lawn then, they often fall victim to drought and don't grow large enough over winter to cause significant damage. Once the grubs start feeding again in spring is when the real issues can begin.

### Why is newly laid turf susceptible to leather jackets?

It is not unusual for recently laid turf to suffer from leather jacket infestation, especially in the first year or two since it was laid. This can be very frustrating when so much time and expense has been invested into a new lawn. It seems that crane flies prefer to lay their eggs on fresh healthy grass which will give them the best chance of successful reproduction, this is particularly noticeable in the shady/damper areas of the lawn.

### How can I repair the damage?

If you still have a fair amount of grass coverage, it may be possible to revive the lawn by undertaking mechanical lawn renovation during late spring or summer to repair

the damage. Completing scarification, aeration, seeding and top dressing is often sufficient to bring a lawn back to life.

If a lawn has become extremely bare, re-turfing or reseeding the lawn may be the only option. Before going ahead with this, rotavating the ground is recommended to expose any left to birds and predators before works go ahead.

### **Is there anything I can do to prevent them coming back?**

The sale of pesticides to kill leather jackets is now banned in the UK. It is possible however to purchase nematode treatments which are microscopic worms. They enter the grubs and infect them with a bacterial disease which kills them. Nematodes are available from various horticultural suppliers, but it can be difficult to treat a lawn successfully.

The nematodes should be watered onto the lawn between August and October when the ground temperature is still warm and moist. This is also the time the adult crane flies lay new eggs which hatch and often start feeding on the lawn. This makes the grubs more susceptible to the nematodes.

Regular mowing will also help leather jackets at bay. Leather jackets are a naturally occurring pest, especially in more rural areas. They are not considered a defect.