

## Yard and Garden – 09-21-2013- Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

How quickly things can change in nature. I work part time for Buffalo County Extension. My normal schedule is Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 9:00 a.m. to about 4:00 p.m.

Last week, when I returned to work on Wednesday morning, I found in my mailbox a sizeable stack of telephone messages. Numerous homeowners had called for me on



Tuesday inquiring about what I now have titled, *The Invasion of the Mysterious Miniature Moth*. Appearing, seemingly out of nowhere, were hordes of tiny, one-half inch, light-tan moths. They had invaded the Kearney landscape. Callers wanted to know their identity, if they were harmful and if so, how to control them? Throughout the balance of that day, I continued receiving call after call asking the same questions.

On Tuesday, I had spent the day working in my yard in Minden. While there, I noticed no moth activity. Needless to say, upon my arrival at work on Wednesday I was taken off guard. Out of curiosity, I quickly took a walk through the extension lawn. There I chased up many of the mysterious intruders. I noticed that when they took flight, they only flew for a short distance and quickly returned to the grass.

My first thought was sod webworm. Typically, when sod webworm moths land, they wrap their wings around their bodies, creating a tubular shape. Examining these miniature moths, I noticed they were delta-shaped, a name given for its similarity in shape to the Greek uppercase letter delta ( $\Delta$ ). Still not knowing their exact identity, I knew it was time I called in the big guns. I took several photographs and sent digital images to the UNL entomology department requesting help.

Although I never found out why they were occurring in such great numbers, I did discover their identification to be alfalfa webworm moths, sometimes called soybean webworm moths and/or garden webworm moths.

According to UNL crop entomology specialist, Robert Wright, I was informed that it is too late in the season for the moths to be a concern on alfalfa or soybeans. He did indicate however that if there were any newly seeded alfalfa fields, the moths could pose a slight risk for potential damage. Furthermore, in an urban setting these marauding moths could create a slight risk to certain garden plants.

Since moths have no chewing mouthparts, it is important to know that adult moths are harmless. They do not feed on plants. It is the larvae stage of the webworm moth that can become problematic. An adult moth's purpose in life is to mate and lay eggs. Eggs can

overwinter and in the spring hatch into hungry larvae. Alfalfa webworm has a broad range of host plants. In great numbers, the larvae can cause considerable damage to an assortment of plants. Among vegetables susceptible to injury are bean, beet, cabbage, cantaloupe, carrot, eggplant, lettuce, parsnip, pea, pepper, spinach and others. They normally avoid grasses. During periods of abundance, I did discover that weeds such as dock, lambs quarters, common mallow, bindweed, dandelion, ragweed, redroot pigweed, saltbush, Russian thistle, sunflower, and sweet clover also become the targeted diet for the alfalfa/soybean/ garden webworm larvae.

For now, *The Invasion of the Mysterious Miniature Moth* has been solved. However, I have a hunch as quickly as they appeared, they will disappear.

If you are a vegetable gardener, I urge you to watch your garden. Depending how well you clean your garden this fall, next spring it may be visited by hordes of tiny webworm larvae. The good news is, since an assortment of weeds is also the diet of these consuming larvae, you might consider the alfalfa/soybean/garden webworm moth as being somewhat beneficial. Note, I said, "**Somewhat.**"