

Sunflower trespassers will be managed

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Sunflower growers have not only seen the potential for increased profit, but are realizing the benefits that come from the crop's versatility and double-cropping. Unfortunately, farmers aren't the only ones attracted to sunflowers.

A variety of insect species find sunflower seeds to be a good source of food and an ideal breeding ground for offspring. Pests can occur at all stages of growth, from seedling to harvest, and experts encourage growers to take action against the threat of insect damage.

Jeff Whitworth, an insect pest Extension specialist at Kansas State University, said, "Protecting sunflowers from insects is a great thing for a farmer to do for his crop." Whitworth stresses that the mismanagement of insect pests can quickly lead to vulnerability and yield depletion. "If you don't actively scout and, if needed, use a control product, sunflowers aren't going to be economical for you at harvest."

To prevent a pest invasion and maximize sunflower yields, growers can take proactive measures to protect their flowers from trespassing insects.

Actively scout

The first step in pest management is to regularly examine plant conditions and identify pests early. Whitworth suggests scouting at least once per week, beginning at the very first stages of growth. "Caterpillars and cutworms can kill the plant early on by feeding on seedlings as they germinate," he added. "For sunflower pests, it's never too early to get out in the field to scout and monitor."

Whitworth highlights a couple of key pests to watch out for as plants develop. "The most severe pest is the sunflower head moth, although seed weevils can also be problematic." These insects compete with farmers by feeding on the harvestable product: the seed. Whitworth added, "Head moths are serious threats. With the sunflower head moth you usually don't scout to see if you're going to treat; you scout to see when you're going to treat."

Identify key sunflower insects

In order to accurately respond to the problem, it's important to identify the insect species that are present on the crop.

- Sunflower Head Moth - Sunflower moths are gray or a light tan color and are arguably the most threatening insect to the crop. Besides depleting seed quality, these moths leave holes in the head, making it vulnerable to diseases like *Rhizopus* head rot, too.

- Seed Weevil - Seed weevils are red-brown or gray in color and can eat up to half or all of a kernel,

resulting in an empty or damaged seed at harvest.

- Sunflower Beetle - Sunflower beetles have a red-brown head and cream and black striped shell. Adults are active during June and July and larvae develop and feed later in the season before dropping into the soil for overwintering.
- Cutworm - Cutworms, notably black cutworms, are serious threats to sunflower yields because they cause damage at the seedling and early emergence stages. If a plant is damaged during the first stages of growth, the crop's overall stand can be significantly reduced.
- Caterpillar - There are a number of damaging caterpillars including looper, painted lady and woollybear caterpillars that eat foliage and create thick webbing over leaves.

Take control

To ward off pests and preserve sunflower quality and yield, experts recommend the timely application of an insecticide, which can provide control at all stages of plant growth. At the seedling stage, an insecticide stops cutworms and beetles from destroying seedlings and chewing plant foliage. Later at the vegetative stage, pests like sunflower beetles and seed weevils are prevented from feeding on flowers, seeds and stems so plants can achieve a strong yield.