Slime Mold in Landscapes – "Dog Vomit Fungus"

Fact Sheet FS1169



Fig. 1. "Dog Vomit" slime mold fruiting bodies.



Fig. 2. Close-up of slime mold showing foamy appearance.



Fig. 3. Slime mold fruiting structures in playground mulch.

Cooperative Extension

Michael W. Haberland - Environmental and Resource Management Agent, Burlington and Camden Counties

From the late spring through fall, many landscapes are dotted with mushrooms, especially following a moist and cool spring season. Some can be damaging, while others are simply an oddity of nature and of little concern except for aesthetics. Such is the case of slime molds. Dog Vomit slime mold (Fuligo septica) is the species most often noticed. Despite the unpleasant name and appearance to a dogs vomit (Fig. 1), it is completely harmless to humans, animals and plants.

Habitat

Dog vomit slime molds are frequently observed when they form large colonies in mulched areas around trees, shrubs, woodlands, or forested areas as well. They can even be found in mulched playground areas (Fig. 2). They usually appear during the late spring to summer following soaking rains. They live in cool, shady, moist places on decaying wood, leaves or other organic matter that retains moisture. Slime molds spend most of their lives out of sight in the soil, leaf matter, or mulch. Eventually, it can move to a more exposed location on top of the mulch, pine straw, stump, sidewalk or foundation of a building, transforming itself into its fruiting or spore producing life stage (Fig. 1 and 3). At that point it appears as a slimy mound or mass in a variety of colors, including bright yellow and orange. Slime molds feed on decaying organic matter, bacteria and protozoa. Although they are not parasites, they may engulf low lying plants by covering or shading them. Slime molds may also appear in lawns due to over watering or poor drainage.

Life Cycle

These slime molds are similar to fungi in that they produce spores which when moistened, germinate and give rise to microscopic organisms. The body of a slime mold is a "blob-like" mass. The mass is referred to as a plasmodium. Much like an amoeba, as they mature, they prey on microorganisms and decaying organic matter by engulfing them, and must have a moist surface to move. With favorable moist conditions the plasmodium can reach two feet or more in diameter. When conditions are no longer favorable, they aggregate to form a spore producing structures resembling a "foamy mass or puffball" (Fig. 2). New spores then form within the structure. As the fruiting body dries up and cracks open, the spores are blown by the wind to new locations where they can start new colonies.

Control

Slime molds are more an aesthetic nuisance then a threat to gardens or lawns. They are generally considered beneficial organisms because they decompose dead organic matter, help cycle nutrients and may consume pathogenic fungi or bacteria in the soil. Slime molds will generally disappear if left alone but their appearance may cause homeowners, park and playground managers to desire a more rapid method of removal.

Chemical treatment has been found ineffective, but cultural and mechanical maintenance of mulched areas

RUTGERS
New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
88 Lipman Drive, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8525
Phone: 848.932.5000

can minimize their presence. Once a colony starts to form, simply allow the mulch to dry out; use a rake and turn it under; or scoop the slime mold up and place in the garbage. You may also be able to break it up with a forceful stream of water.

Untreated slime molds can also quickly disappear as the weather dries out the organism and it returns to its invisible spore stage. It is important to note that if conditions for slime mold development are still present and a food source is available, they may reappear throughout the season. The simplest thing to do is to look at them for their unique and interesting beauty, and tolerate a little slime mold now and then.

References

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Tom Volk fungi of the month June 1999. tomvolkfungi.net

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88 Lipman Drive, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8525
Phone: 848.932.5000