Several types of caterpillars or “worms” may attack the crop later in the season. The most common is the corn earworm. Corn earworm and fall armyworm larvae are found in most fields. However, many fields do not need treatment, and scouting to determine the number and size of larvae is a good idea. Both insects can cause severe defoliation if not detected early. They can be especially damaging in August and early September. Generally, corn earworm causes more damage and is easier to control than fall armyworm, so count the species separately. The fall armyworm has a distinctive upside-down Y on the head.

The threshold for treatment varies with the time of year. Generally, earworms occur in August and the threshold for treatment is as soon as the worms reach 4 per row foot. In early September, at least 6 worms per row foot are necessary to cause economic loss, and by mid-September no treatment is justified unless at least 10 worms per row foot are seen. Danitol, an insecticide for corn earworms and spider mites, showed good effectiveness against fall armyworms, as well as earworms, spider mites, and leafhoppers, in one test. In 2002 and 2007, we were hit hard by beet armyworms. Lannate works well when the worms are small, but newer products, such as Steward and Tracer, seem the most effective for beet armyworms and also fall armyworms in peanuts. Formulations of Bacillus thuringensis, such as Dipel DF and ES, for corn earworm and Xentari for beet and fall armyworm work well when applied in a timely manner and are considered organic approaches.

Thresholds
Scouting fields is the only way to determine if treatment is needed. To check for an active infestation, sample by reaching halfway across plants along 2 feet of row with a dowel rod and shaking the foliage vigorously for 5 to 8 seconds toward the row middle. Do this on both sides (for a total of 4 row feet). Using the dowel, push the foliage back so that you can see the soil under the plant. Carefully identify and count the larvae on the ground and note their size in inches. Repeat the sample in several parts of the field.
Up until September, treatment is justified by an average of 16 larvae per sample (4 larvae per row-foot). For the first two weeks in September, the action threshold is 12 larvae per sample; after mid-September, it is 20 larvae per sample. The threshold for treatment varies with the time of year. Generally, earworms occur in August and the threshold for treatment is 4 per row foot. In early September, at least 6 worms per row foot are necessary to cause economic loss, and by mid-September no treatment is justified unless at least 10 worms per row foot are seen.

Chemical Control
If treatment is necessary, apply sprays using systems that provide good canopy penetration and coverage. If spider mites are already present in the field, use of some insecticides may allow for rapid build-up. Scout fields for treatment effectiveness and for possible increases in spider mite activity soon after applications. Danitol, an insecticide for corn earworms and spider mites, showed good effectiveness against fall armyworms, as well as earworms, spider mites, and leafhoppers, in one test. Lannate works well on beet armyworms when the worms are small, but newer products, such as Steward and Tracer, seem the most effective for beet armyworms and also fall armyworms in peanuts.

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