

For: April 2009
By: Ken Rudisill
UF/IFAS -Bay County Horticulture Extension Faculty

Don't Get Too Anxious To Fertilize or Fix Lawns

Warmer weather and longer days are bringing lawns out of dormancy. While many lawns are greening up, some areas may be decidedly brown.

The most frequent lawn problem experienced in the spring is a "dead spot". Spring dead spots are not uncommon; they can be caused by several factors and are very difficult to correctly diagnosis. The cause for spring dead spots is generally something that happened several months ago.

Fertilizing too late in the fall can result in a spring dead spot. New, lush growth in late fall doesn't have time to harden off before the first frost. The chance of the lawn surviving cold temperatures, especially if a high-nitrogen fertilizer was used, is decreased. It is best to fertilize around the first of September.

Many lawn pests are at their peak population late in the growing season. A fall infestation of insects or disease can often go unnoticed because the grass is beginning to go dormant. In spring, the fall pest problem results in very visible brown dead patches. The problem pest may or may not be currently active. If anything, mark the border of your dead spot with something like golf tees (something that you can push down into the grass and leave for a period of time). If the dead area creeps beyond your marked margin, then you do have an active problem and it needs to be diagnosed before an appropriate treatment can be started. Poor cultural practices the previous growing season can also contribute to spring dead spots by weakening the turfgrass and making it more susceptible to cold damage. Overwatering, mowing too low and overfertilization are a few practices that will contribute to spring dead spots.

Regardless of the cause of the spring dead spots, lawns are slow to recover in the spring. Even though the day temperatures are warming, the night temperatures are keeping the soil temperature cool. The cool soil temperature

keeps root growth slowed which, of course, slows shoot growth. Cooler soil temperature also affects the availability of nutrients.

Rather than worrying about what chemical to apply to your spring dead spot, relax. Turfgrasses comes out of dormancy slowly and usually not uniformly. Give your grass more time before you give up on it. After several weeks, if it is still not doing well then do some repair work. Rake out the dead areas and either seed, sprig, plug or sod the damaged area.

Seeing early signs of spring with daffodils, azaleas and dogwoods blooming greatly tempts us to bring out the fertilizer. Don't rush into fertilizing your lawn too soon. This may be setting your lawn up for serious injury if we have a late freeze.

Heavy fertilization early in the spring when the lawn is just beginning to green-up will enhance foliar vegetative growth at the expense of cold tolerance, root development, deplete carbohydrate reserves and enhance diseases. You would be much better off delaying lawn fertilization until the turf has completely greened and temperatures have moderated more. A general guide is to wait until you have cut the lawn at least twice before applying spring fertilization.

Be patient with your lawn. Warmer temperatures and correct cultural practices will result in improved growth.