

Let's Talk Gardening

May 6, 2005

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The Country Gardener

Grass and Grass Problems

Last Sunday, I was working with the Gardening Volunteers of South Texas in the turf grass and soils areas at the Garden Jazz Party at the San Antonio Botanical Garden. Our job there is primarily to answer questions people have about each of the nine areas they visit at this event in the Garden. I thought you might be interested in some of the questions and answers that took place there.

Question: Why won't the St. Augustine grass grow under my big ol' live oak tree in the back yard?

Answer: No grass will grow in the shade. Even St. Augustine needs a little sun to grow and stay healthy. Sure, it'll stay alive for a couple of years, but after that, it's probably gonna start to look kinda yellow and then start thinning out and eventually it's gonna die. So, why fight it? If you can't get the grass to grow in a particular area, stop trying. It's expensive to keep throwing money down that rat hole. Put in some type of ground cover, like Asiatic jasmine or English ivy, that WILL do well in the shade and be green all year round. Your second choice might be to get the tree-canopy thinned out a little to let more sunshine get to the grass.

Question: My St. Augustine grass is getting thinner each year and is kinda yellow. How come?

Answer: What do you feed it?

Question: Nothing. Why?

Answer: Don't you think it would like to have something to eat about once a year?

Question: Nah. It's grass. You plant it and it grows. Period.

Answer: Hey, it's your grass and you're the one who asked why it looks so bad. You want an answer or not?

Question: Yeah.

Answer: Feed it with some 19-5-9 slow release or 9-2-2 organic fertilizer and be sure to follow the directions on the bag. More is not better. Then water it in real good to be sure that the fertilizer gets to the soil under the grass. If you wanna help it even more, put about a half-inch of compost on it each February and water it in real good so that it gets to the soil, too. It'll take 2-3 years to get the soil in shape, but it's worth it.

Question: That's a lotta work.

Answer: Hey, it's your grass.

Question: Why is my grass getting thinner and thinner each year? I fertilize it each year and water it but it doesn't seem to do any good.

Answer: Probably because the soil under the grass is compacted and the roots of the grass can't get any nutrients out of it.

Question: ...and?

Answer: Compost it.

Question: What's that mean?

Answer: Go to Fertile Garden Supply or Gardenville and buy yourself a few yards of compost and have them deliver it onto your driveway. Take a shovel and a wheelbarrow and spread the compost around the yard about a half-inch deep—just enough not to smother what grass is left. Water it in so that it gets to the soil under the grass. In 2-3 years, you'll have re-activated your soil and the grass will get green, thick, and healthy again. You can't go wrong with compost. It's the best thing you can do for your lawn.

Question: Sounds like a lotta work.

Answer: Hey, it's your grass.

You beginning to get the picture here? People ask the same questions over and over—year after year. I remember seeing some of these people last year and they were asking the same questions. They want grass, but don't wanna work for it. It doesn't just happen, does it?

This went on the whole day. Same ol' questions, same-o, same-o.

Question: I just heard you tell that guy to fertilize his St. Augustine grass. That doesn't apply to Zoysia does it?

Answer: No. Don't feed it and it'll die, just like his. It's your call. You want grass, you gotta feed it. You don't want grass, don't feed it. It's real simple.

You think I'm getting "crotchety" in my old age? I have a real hard time tolerating stupidity any more. I may have to quit going to these things and answering questions. Maybe I'll get lucky and they just won't invite me any more. I donno.

Hey, if you need a speaker for about an hour or so, I've just added a new topic to my inventory: square-foot gardening. It's gardening at its simplest and easiest. There's a 30 minute video and then comments for about 30 minutes. Lemme know. (Will work for food and gas money!)

Send your ideas, questions, or comments to: gardener@gvtc.com