

Let's Talk Gardening

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The Country Gardener

Your (Not My) St. Augustine Grass

Last Saturday, I was at a meeting where Dr. Jerry Parsons was the speaker. The location was in a park in one of the neighborhoods on the Northeast side of San Antonio and Jerry was leaning up against a tree "doing his thing." He talked a lot about St. Augustine grass and how good or bad it is at this time of year.

Generally speaking, St. Augustine grass at this time of year starts looking pretty sad; either with brown patch or take-all patch. Both of these problems are caused by different fungi and the treatments are different.

Brown patch is the disease where you begin to see round, brown patches in the grass and the circle spreads outward. Eventually the green starts coming back in the center of the spot and, usually by next spring the whole circle is filled in again. You can tell if you have brown patch by grabbing a handful of grass and pulling. If it comes right up but no roots come with it, you probably have brown patch. The fungus doesn't kill the roots and stems, only the base of the leaves.

Lawns that get too much water or have too much high-nitrogen fertilizer are the ones showing brown spot at this time of year. Applying a good chemical fungicide will help the problem, but it doesn't solve the problem. The problem is usually a low spot in the yard that holds moisture from the sprinkler. The solution to this is to gently raise the level of the low spot with a top dressing containing compost and sand. Just apply about a half-inch or so and wait until the grass grows up through it, and then add another half-inch. Keep doing it until the spot is level with the rest of the yard around it.

Take-all patch, on the other hand, is a whole 'nuther' story. It is not circular in appearance but rather irregular in pattern. This disease kills roots, stems, and all. This disease is much more difficult to manage according to Dr. Parsons. Less water, no fertilizer right now, mowing the grass very tall and less frequently, and good soil drainage seem to be the best approach. Adding about a half-inch of peat moss will add acidity which the fungus doesn't like. There are fungicides that will help, but, evidently, not much.

If you have take-all patch and want to fix it more or less permanently, replace it with the Floratam-variety of St. Augustine grass developed by Florida A&M and Texas A&M. According to Dr. Parsons, it is the most drought tolerant, is more bug resistant, and is more tolerant of brown patch and take-all patch.

Jerry was on a real tirade about how people keep using corn meal or other organic solutions to the fungus problems. His comments were that they just don't work on fungal evils regardless of who says they do and he's got the proof on plantanswers.com. Donno.

I say "not my" in the title of today's column because my St. Augustine grass looks a whole lot like hay right now. It's probably gonna be that way until it rains. Even then, it may still look like hay because it may have given up the ghost due to lack of water. But that's OK with me; I'd rather have Bermuda grass anyway. It's tougher and goes dormant when the rain stops. It comes back when the rain starts again.

Please leave the grass clippings on the yard when you mow. They decompose by next week and add back to the soil almost all the nutrients they took out of it to grow. You don't need to send the clippings to the trash dump. All the grass sent last year is still there--it doesn't decompose when the plastic bags are buried. I've heard that 40-50 percent of all the stuff in most dumps in Texas is grass and leaves. That's ridiculous.

Mow the St. Augustine grass at 2 ½ inches in the shade and 3 ½ inches in the sun and be sure that the blade on the mower is SHARP. Dull blades damage the grass.

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