

Summer Lawn Care - Grass Selection and Insect Control

Caring for a lawn in the Rio Grande Valley is a year around job. Although lawn care is constant, having a thick, lush looking lawn is not a major undertaking. Knowledge of the proper grass selection for the specific site and knowledge of proper insect, disease, mowing, fertilizing and water practices will assure a professional look. This article will detail the appropriate grasses to select for your given lawn situation and controlling insects in your yard. The article next week will detail lawn diseases and cures, mowing frequency and heights, fertilizing amounts and intervals, and irrigation amounts, along with the best time to water your lawn and why.

Grass Selection. The three most common grasses recommended for lawns in the Valley are bermuda, carpet and buffalograss. Of the three, only bermuda and carpet grasses are commercially available as sod from local grass farms. Seed for all three types may be obtained from many local nurseries.

Bermuda is a soft, fine leafed (1/32 to 1/16 inches wide) grass that is commonly used on ball fields, golf courses and other areas that get high foot or equipment traffic. Bermuda is tolerant of drought, requiring watering only once or twice a month, and is resistant to many diseases and insects. The best commercial hybrid for this area is 'Tifgreen'. Bermuda grass has one major drawback - it is not shade tolerant. Under heavy shade trees like Live Oak, Rio Grande Ash, etc. or day long shade from a building, bermuda grass will become patchy, and of poor quality. Bermuda is also a very aggressive plant and will overtake flower beds rapidly and eventually kill out buffalograss. For this reason alone, even though buffalograss is, of the three grasses recommended for South Texas lawns, a native plant to this area, it will not survive long in the average lawn due to competition from bermuda grass.

Buffalograss is a soft, fine leafed (1/32 to 1/16 inches wide) grass that is an extremely drought and heat tolerant plant, usually never grows taller than 6 to 8 inches, has few disease or insect problems, and is moderately shade tolerant. This grass is highly recommended only in areas where there is no chance of contamination from bermuda grass. Remember a lawn mower that has recently cut bermuda grass can be a source of contamination.

Carpet or St. Augustine is a coarse leaf (1/4 inch wide or wider) deep green grass that does well in shade or full sun. The commercial hybrids 'Floritam' and 'Raleigh' are resistant to St. Augustine decline. 'Floritam' is resistant to chinch bugs and is drought tolerant. St. Augustine grass requires watering twice a week during our long hot summers.

All Valley grass farms sell sod with different percentages of carpet and bermuda grass for yards that have combinations of shade and or dry areas, as most do. So when ordering sod or seeding a lawn a mixture of both carpet and bermuda grass may be best as it will assure a thick lawn in all combinations of shade, full sun, dry or moist site conditions.

Insect Problems. June bug larvae or grubworms can kill an entire lawn if not treated. In May and June once those hard, brown beetles arrive their grubs will soon be feeding. Grubs can actually be the larvae of several different kinds of beetles, including June, Asiatic and Japanese, who lay their eggs in the soil. The eggs hatch about two weeks later, and the baby grubs start feeding on the grass roots in the top three inches of soil. When cooler weather arrives, they move deeper into the soil to overwinter, and then start feeding again the following spring. Grubworm damage is very easy to identify. In summer or early fall, even in well irrigated lawns, the grass starts to turn brown, in large irregular patches. These brown areas will have no roots, and will sometimes even roll up easily, like a rug. Dig an inch or two into the soil under these brown areas and you will find the milky-white-to-grayish worms, 1/8 inch to one inch long, with brown heads and three pair of legs. The younger the grubs, the easier they will be to kill, and the less damage your lawn will suffer, so treating about two weeks after June bugs arrive is the ideal time. Here in the Valley that is June.

The best treatments are a new product called 'Intercept' and two older standby insecticides: 'Diazinon' and 'Dursban'. These will both kill the existing grubs and prevent further grub damage for two weeks. 'Intercept' will be effective for 6 weeks. However, if you are unsure of what is causing your lawn to die out in patches, take a sample of your grass with roots and soil attached, to your local Texas Certified Nursery Professional, for an accurate diagnosis and instructions on how to treat your lawn.

Fleas, although not a problem for your lawn they are annoying dangerous insects that can transmit a number of diseases to humans and pets. Our warm winters, combined with long periods of dry weather produce heavy flea populations at an astonishing rate. In order to get rid of fleas treat your house, pets and lawn at the same time. For indoor treatment, foggers, which can penetrate carpets, drawers and behind baseboards are probably the most effective method. Outdoors, 'Dursban' gives the best results; but it's important to treat more than once, at six to seven day intervals, due to delayed hatching of flea eggs. Ideally while the house and yard are being treated take your dog to the vet for a flea dip.

(Information source: Cecile Waugh of Waugh's Nursery, McAllen, TX)

Article written by the Cameron County Horticulture Education Committee.

Questions or Comments write to: Cameron County Master Gardeners Association, 1390 W. Expressway 83, San Benito, TX 78586-3869.

Phone: 956-361-8236 or Fax: 956-361-8289 or email:

cameroncountymastergardeners@gmail.com