FLOODS, DEBRIS ENDANGER GRASSES

As we clean up from yet another hurricane and as debris is collected from the curb, you might notice another problem occurring that was not immediately noticed - turf decline.

Devastation from hurricanes can cause multiple problems for your lawn. Damage might be caused by prolonged periods of standing water, uprooted trees, and shading and obstruction from debris. Less visible problems might include damage to root systems resulting from compacted soils.

The first step to turf recovery is to pick up any debris in the yard, such, as wood, glass, stones, nails and other metal objects deposited on lawn areas. This debris is a safety hazard and can damage lawnmowers. Also, remove leaves or any other material, which can smother and kill the grass.

If you had debris piled in a spot on your lawn for a long period of time, the grass will most likely be yellow or, bleached-looking when the stuff is removed. Once the grass is re-exposed to sunlight, it will start photosynthesizing (producing food) and will turn green again. The grass will generally grow out of this. If the turf is under water, the degree of injury will depend on the duration of submergence in water, water depth, temperature, type of grass, light intensity, and the condition of grass prior to flooding.

Most grasses will survive four to six days submergence at normal summer temperatures. Aerate and lightly fertilize flooded areas as soon as possible after the water recedes. Areas submerged longer than four to six days might not survive and will require complete reestablishment. If the water does not drain quickly, trenches can be dug to encourage water movement to lower land areas.

Flooding might also leave layers of mud or silt on the lawn. This should immediately be removed to allow sunlight to reach the turf. You can remove mud and silt with a flatheaded shovel. The area should then be washed with a stream of fresh water to move any remaining material from the leaf surfaces. Your lawn might be too wet to mow for some time. When you finally can mow, be sure to set the mower as high as possible to remove as little shoot tissue as you can.

Because of all the rain and saturated soil, disease issues are common in many lawns. If you see signs of what looks like a fungus, you should determine what disease pathogen you have (check online at http://turf.ufl.edu in the residential section for disease keys and photos) and apply an appropriate fungicide. Let the lawn dry out and regrow.

Keep an eye out for damaged areas that do not recover by next spring and replace those areas with new plugs of the same species and type that you currently have. All of the warm season grasses are prone to contract disease in a wet environment, though Bahia grass will generally be the least affected. Turning your sprinklers off during this wet weather will also help to prevent diseases in your turf.

Fall is normally a good time to apply a complete granular fertilizer to your lawn. But with the recent hurricane and the flooding rains that we have had, it is an even better idea to make this application to support new growth and prepare your grass for winter. If you do plan to fertilize this fall, look for a slow-release nitrogen source that will help the grass grow and green up slowly for the next few months. Also, find a product with a high potassium number (K, the 3rd number on the bag). This might reduce disease incidences and will help the grass stay more winter-hardy.

The best thing to do to help your turf recover after the hurricanes is to keep it healthy and to try to reduce any other stresses on your lawn as it recovers (i.e., scalping, traffic, etc.). Be careful not to over-water or over-fertilize.

For more information on turf, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000.
They are available to take your calls Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2p.m.

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