GREEN CARPET NEEDS ATTENTION IN SUMMER

Summer's heat and steamy humidity are tough on turf grass. Weeds and bugs are trouble this time of year.

Bahia grass and St. Augustine grass are the two common lawn grasses for our area. While both are relatively care-free, you may have problems now and then.

Bahia grass is a clumping grass that produces tall Y-shaped seed spikes. It is commonly grown from seed or sod. Since it grows in clumps from the original seeded plant, it is slow to fill in. It is very drought-tolerant and has few problems when cared for properly.

In years past, mole crickets have destroyed pastures and lawns as they burrow through the soil. Home gardeners, ranchers and sod producers have poured a variety of chemicals on the soil to kill this destructive insect.

Mole crickets are an imported pest from South America. Researchers at the University of Florida worked with Charlie Williams, Osceola County Extension Agent (Agriculture), to introduce natural enemies of the mole cricket. Recent evidence has shown good spread of a parasitic nematode that eventually kills mole crickets. The red-eyed fly also has helped get mole crickets under control, resulting in less need for chemical pesticides.

St. Augustine grass produces vigorous creeping stems that grow on top of the ground. It spreads easily when planted from sprigs, small grass cuttings or sod. It often grows into places we don't want it, such as flowerbeds and sidewalks. You can easily move cuttings from these problem areas into other areas of the yard.

St. Augustine grass sometimes yellows late in the summer because of iron deficiency. Use a liquid iron spray for lawns to provide quick green-up in the summer. There's no need to fertilize if slow release fertilizer was applied in the spring. Summer fertilization with liquid or granular fertilizer that contains water-soluble nitrogen such as ammonium nitrate results in lush growth, but it is susceptible to chinch bugs and lawn caterpillars. Wait until late September for fall fertilization with a complete fertilizer.

Weeds in lawns signal another problem. Dense turf resists the invasion of most weeds. To prevent weeds, use slow-release fertilizers as needed, possibly twice a year, mow both types of grasses to a cutting height of 3 to 4" and avoid overwatering. Apply ½ to ¾" of water as needed, when the grass begins to wilt.

Frequent light sprinkling encourages shallow rooting of turf grass, which is then less tolerant of drought. It also promotes sprouting of weed seeds in thin areas and growth of shallow-rooted weeds such as crabgrass.

Once growing, crabgrass is tough to manage. It is hard to kill grassy weeds without killing the grass you want for a lawn. Spot-spray with glyphosate, an ingredient in products such as Roundup. This kills weeds and grass. Then you have to quickly plant sod in the area to prevent weed seeds from sprouting in the vacant space.

Some gardeners pray for frost in the winter to kill the crabgrass. Then, a pre-emergent herbicide, also called weed seed preventer, can be used to prevent the weed seeds from sprouting. They prevent other grass seeds from sprouting too, so you have to fill in thin or dead areas with sod.
Don't let turf troubles get you down. Let us help you diagnose the problem before you blast it with chemicals.

Master Gardeners, who are trained volunteers, help diagnose plant problems at the Osceola County Extension Office Monday to Friday from 10 am to 2 pm. Drop off samples for identification or call us with your questions at (321) 697-3000. You can also e-mail photos or describe your problems to epabon5@ufl.edu Many lawn-care publications are available on our Web site at http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu. This is a new address for our Web site, so make a note of it.

If you have some time to volunteer and want to learn more about growing plants in our climate, consider becoming a Master Gardener. We are interviewing now. Training begins in late September. Call Barbara Hedden, at (321) 697-3000 to request an application or for more information.

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