

How's Your Lawn This Spring?

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"Are you dissatisfied with your centipede lawn this spring? Do you have dead areas within your lawn that failed to turn green or areas that are weak, open, and thinning with intermingled yellow grass? If so, you're dealing with a very common problem. It's called centipede decline." Those are the words of my fellow extension agent, Larry Williams, over in Okaloosa County. Every spring, extension agents, garden center personnel, landscape maintenance personnel, and pest control company personnel are flooded with questions from home gardeners about problems with centipede lawns.

Williams continues, "There is no one single or individual cause for centipede decline. This condition involves a complex of incorrect management practices and sometimes involves nematodes (microscopic worms in the root area), ground pearls (scale-like insects in the root area), and fungi. But a major contributing factor to centipede decline is over-fertilization. As a matter of fact, if you want to induce this condition in a centipede yard, all you need to do is to be a little heavy handed with fertilizer. And in a year or two, you will see sections of the lawn beginning to show the classic symptoms of decline * patches that begin to die at spring green up of shortly thereafter. It's that simple. Centipede does not and will not tolerate being fertilized with enough nitrogen to produce a dark green color!"

Dan Mullins, University of Florida Extension Agent in Santa Rosa County, says it this way, "We are literally killing our centipede with kindness, especially where fertilization is involved." Dan, Larry, and I all agree. Centipede has a naturally light green color. Our advice is to fertilize centipede sparingly, accept its light crabapple green color and enjoy its low maintenance requirements.

We suggest paying close attention to the following checklist when fertilizing centipede.

- Don't apply fertilizer until warm spring weather is here to stay. Fertilizing before the last frost invites disaster. As Larry Williams says, "I do not fertilize my centipede until well into the month of April and sometimes I'll wait until May."
- Choose the fertilizer type carefully. There are many brands and formulations and making a choice can be confusing. Avoid the use of high phosphorus-containing products. Phosphorus is the middle number in the common 3-number fertilizer analysis. 15-0-15 is what I recommend. It has no phosphorus. Excessively high levels of phosphorus in the soil have been implicated in centipede decline and the inability of the grass to take up iron and other micronutrients. Also, make sure the 15-0-15 has half of its nitrogen (7.5%) in a slow or controlled release form.
- As Dan Mullins says, "I have never seen a centipede lawn that died from lack of fertilizer." Only a little fertilizer is required. For example, using the 15-0-15, you would only apply 6 pounds of the fertilizer per 1,000 square feet of lawn area. Two light, split applications spaced several weeks apart are better than one heavy application. If split applications are made, you will only apply 3 pounds of fertilizer per thousand square feet per application. This amounts to only about 25 pounds for an average-sized lawn, probably much less than the average person applies. Take time to measure the fertilizer or you may be damaging your lawn.
- Larry Williams recommends "having a complete soil test done every three years so that soil nutrient levels can be altered, if needed." You can obtain the soil test mailing kit from your Leon County Extension office at 615 Paul Russell Road.
- Water immediately after the fertilizer application in order to wash the fertilizer off the grass leaves and into the root zone. This helps prevent burning, helps prevent waste of fertilizer, and helps reduce

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stormwater pollution.

For more information about lawn problems, visit the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension website at leon.ifas.ufl.edu. Go to the garden and landscape page and you will find a Diagnostic Chart for Lawn Problems.

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