Most of us have some type of lawn. Some of us take pride in our lawn. Others of us view the lawn as a necessary evil and say that we could care less about it. Regardless of our degree of affection for our lawn, though, most of us are plagued by lawn problems from time to time.

The most common cause of lawn problems is lack of sufficient sunlight. The grasses grow best in full sun. The further you move away from the ideal situation of full sun, the poorer the grass will grow. Some types of St. Augustine grass, such as ‘Seville’, have better shade tolerance than other grasses. But even ‘Seville’ St. Augustine grass grows better in full sun and will not tolerate too much shade, especially when there are other stresses on the lawn, too.

Soil compaction, or lack of aeration in the soil, also contributes to poor growth. The soil on most home sites is compacted, due to factors such as construction traffic and soil movement. Therefore, the soil needs to be tilled and broken up before the grass is planted. Existing lawns can be further compacted by activities such as driving on the lawn or frequent foot traffic. Compaction in an existing lawn has no easy remedy. Mechanical soil aeration can help a little, if used repeatedly. Above all, if your lawn has compacted soil, realize that it has a shallow root system. You will have to water more often and in smaller amounts, and minimize other stresses such as mowing too low.
The two most common lawn grasses used in our area are centipede and St. Augustine. Centipede naturally resumes growth slowly in the spring, whereas St. Augustine usually starts out quickly once the soil warms up. Because centipede starts out slowly, many people tend to over-fertilize it, trying to speed up its growth and make it darker green. But over-fertilizing centipede will lead to its decline. Be patient with centipede and usually it will be growing well when the summer rains start. If not, some other factor such as too much shade, soil compaction, or nematodes may be affecting it.

St. Augustine grass usually greens up pretty well in the spring if it’s receiving enough sunlight. However, with the frequent summer rains, it can begin to have some problems, especially if it’s on a shaded site. Gray leaf spot, a fungus disease, is favored by the rainy weather in the shaded areas where the grass stays moist for longer periods. Chinch bugs can also be a problem. But they start in the sunnier areas of the St. Augustine lawn, causing straw-colored patches.

Sometimes we cause lawn problems by worrying too much about weeds. Herbicides, or weed-killers, can easily damage lawn grasses if applied incorrectly. Weeds are opportunists. If the grass isn’t growing well in a spot, weeds will seize the opportunity and grow in that spot. But the solution to the problem doesn’t lie in killing the weed but rather in improving the growing conditions for the grass, if possible.

Some of you have zoysia grasses such as ‘Empire’ or ‘El Toro’. Zoysias seem to tolerate a little more shade than centipede but not as much as St. Augustine grasses such as ‘Seville’. Zoysias sometimes have problems with fungus diseases when they get very thatchy. But thatch is generally caused by over-watering and over-fertilizing, factors under your control.

In late summer to fall, any of the grasses can be attacked by the tropical sod webworm. Tropical sod webworms only feed at night, but they can rapidly devour large patches of a lawn. If you suspect sod webworm activity, look for telltale signs such as chewed-out notches in the leaf blades of the grass on the perimeters of the affected patches. You may also see the granulated pellets of excrement leaf behind by the caterpillars. And at night with a flashlight you can find the caterpillars feeding. Most years we don’t have much of a problem with tropical sod webworms. But some years, in the period from August through October, they are very problematic.

Local garden centers sell lawn fungicides for fungus diseases and insecticides for the insect problems. Occasionally you may have to use one of these products. But first be sure you really have a disease or insect problem. Applying insecticides when they aren’t really needed can especially be a problem because the insecticides also kill insect predators which can help keep the pests under control. When you buy a pesticide, whether it be a fungicide, insecticide,
herbicide or whatever, make sure you buy one that is approved for residential lawn use and for the pest you want to control.

If your lawn is St. Augustine or zoysia and hasn’t been fertilized since spring, you may wish to make another application of fertilizer in August to early September. If you don’t wait too late, you can use the same 15-0-15 or similar fertilizer at the rate of six pounds per thousand square feet of lawn if the fertilizer contains half its nitrogen in a slow-release or water-insoluble form. The other option is to use a low-nitrogen winterizer type of fertilizer such as 5-0-20. But use one or the other, not both.

Finally, if the weather turns dry in September and October, as it usually does, don’t forget to water occasionally. The lawn will still need water and shouldn’t turn brown until we’ve had a heavy frost or freeze.

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