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Turf Diagnostics

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GARDEN NOTES

TURF DIAGNOSTICS

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Ailing computers, cars and lawns can all be frustrating and costly if you don't diagnose their problems correctly.

“It is critical to first figure out what the problem is before you waste time and money fixing what isn't broken,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. “As an example, I met a person who thought he had grubs eating his lawn. He poured enough insecticide on the lawn to kill a couple of battalions of army ants and still the brown spot persisted. It turned out that a sprinkler was clogged and wasn't watering that area. I recommend checking a few things before going to the nursery to buy that arsenal of poison.”

First, examine the watering system, he suggests. Turn on the sprinklers once or twice a month and watch them work. Make sure each sprinkler is covering its area, and check the nozzles to make sure they are working properly. One clogged nozzle can cause real problems.

The next step is to check the soil, Goodspeed says. Make sure the water is penetrating to a depth of six to eight inches. Go out with a long screwdriver after the system has watered and shove the tool into the ground. It will slide easily through moist soil, but will be hard to push into dry areas. If the water does not penetrate deep enough, let the system run a little longer.

Most lawns are over-watered, he says. As you push the screwdriver into the soil, check to see if the soil smells a little rotten, or if the ground is soggy and soft. These may be signs you are over-watering. Remember, water deeply and infrequently.

This is also an opportune time and a good method for checking for compaction, Goodspeed says. Over the years soil can become compacted which prevents the water from penetrating properly. This can happen to a whole lawn or just to small patches or areas. Soil compaction keeps the water from getting to the roots so they do not grow normally. Consider aerating the area at least annually.

If watering practices or soil compaction are not the problem, start digging around and look at the grass and its roots, he says. Grab a handful of grass in a problem area and pull. If it comes up like a piece of sod, check that area, looking more closely at the soil for some white grubs.

“Most grubs feed just below the crown of the plants,” Goodspeed says. “Large grubs are

easy to spot because they are about the size of a hood ornament on an old Chevy. They curl up in a ‘C’ shape when disturbed. Smaller grubs require some digging and closer investigating. They have a brown head and a white body.”

Both types of grubs can be hard to control, he says. The best thing to do is keep the lawn healthy by not over-watering, leaving it two and one-half to three inches tall and fertilizing it correctly. There are some turf insecticides that kill grubs once they are established.

If you check the lawn and no grubs are there, examine the type of grass that is growing, he says. Bentgrass and other less desirable types can move into a lawn, disguise themselves as typical lawn grass, then start looking brown and dead in the heat of the summer. Because bentgrass is easy to pull out, some people start thinking they need to treat for grubs.

If bentgrass has indeed moved into your lawn, it can be identified because it has a bluer color than the rest of the grass, and has a tendency to become leggy and lay down, Goodspeed says. The only cure is to kill it out and reseed or sod the area once the bentgrass is dead.

If none of these solutions are the answer to your lawn problems, consider your fertilizing practices, he says. Most lawns need to be fertilized just four times a year; once in the spring, again in the summer and twice in the fall. Too much fertilization is wasteful and can burn the grass. If your lawn's brown areas are in a pattern, this may be the problem.

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