

Summer Weather is Hard on Lawns

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Many of us look forward to summer; the warm temperatures, the long days and all the associated fun activities. But as for our lawns, they are far less excited by the hot temperatures, those summer nights that don't cool below 70 degrees, the humidity, or the blast furnace southwest winds. The weather conditions truly do take a toll on the appearance of our lawn grasses and many times we put them under even more stress with how we manage them.

Some people have warm season turf grasses like zoysia, buffalograss or Bermudagrass. These grasses thrive in warm and hot weather, even dry weather, so summer is their thing! They thrive with long days, high temperatures and lots of sunshine. But they are slow to green up in the spring and go dormant by the end of September.

Most of us, though, have cool season turf grasses, namely tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass or maybe perennial ryegrass. These are called cool season grasses because they grow best in the cooler weather of spring and fall. Given their preference they would go dormant or semi-dormant heat of summer. These cool season grasses will stay nice green and growing right along in the summer heat IF they are provided plenty of water. This year, so far, we've been receiving frequent enough rains of adequate quantity that most lawn grasses, whether they are irrigated or not, are still growing, much to the chagrin of those of us who look forward to them going dormant so we don't have to mow so much!

With the high humidity and rainfall, and surprisingly low wind speeds, we have wonderful conditions for a disease of tall fescue called brown patch. Brown patch is a fungus that is found in soil everywhere. When we have warm temperatures, especially night time temperatures that never drop below 70, and rain or even just high humidity or frequent lawn watering, brown patch tends to get started. Generally brown patch attacks the leaves of the fescue plant causing first brown spots on the leaf and then killing the entire leaf. Generally that's all the further it gets, it just kills the grass leaves. Eventually the weather cools off, the disease wanes and the grasses releaf and do just fine. But in the meantime you have these deadish looking brown patches in your yard. Fungicides can slow or even stop the spread of the disease but it may require multiple treatments over the course of the summer to keep the disease at bay. Most homeowners just ride it out knowing that cooler weather will allow the turf to recover.

If it turns off dry, it is perfectly okay to let your cool season lawn go dormant which it will if there is no rain for a couple of weeks. Bluegrass tends to go dormant much more quickly than fescue. Fescue will stay green longer without rain but it will go dormant eventually. If the lawn does go dormant it may be helpful to make sure it receives about one inch of irrigation per month to help keep the crowns hydrated. If you don't want your cool season yard to go dormant you will need to apply about one inch of irrigation per week. This irrigation is best applied as one or two irrigations applying at least one half inch of water per application. Don't ask me how long that is - set out some empty tuna cans as rain gauges. Irrigate in the early morning only. Late afternoon irrigations only set up your yard to have more disease problems.

If you do let your lawn go dormant you need to be careful not to put excessive traffic on it. As those grass crowns dehydrate they become subject to crushing injury from riding lawn mowers or heavy foot traffic. Lawns will survive our summers and they will do it better if you work with them rather than against them!