

Managing the Home Lawn

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Conway, SC — July 8, 2008 – Turfgrass management in the home landscape can be frustrating at times for the average gardener. Most homeowners want a decent looking lawn but often fail at their endeavors. Maintaining an attractive, healthy lawn in the south can be quite an adventure in gardening fortitude, especially when you want to garden with little input.

To begin with, it is important to properly prepare a site and select a grass species that will thrive in your landscape. During the construction of many landscapes, the areas that are to be devoted to turf are often neglected. The soil is not amended to provide a quality growing environment, soil test are not performed to assure the chemistry of the soil is adequate for the turf selected, poorly drained areas are left unattended and grades are not provided to assure adequate surface drainage. You may also find a turf species has been planted that will not grow well at your particular site. All too often these conditions are seen in newly constructed landscapes leaving us with poor growing conditions leading to poor quality turf.

As with all your landscape plantings, soil preparation for your turfgrass is essential. The compacted, usually clay filled soil used to build a house on is not necessarily conducive to growing turf. Organic matter should be tilled into your soil to provide the needed aeration and drainage needed for healthy root growth. If nothing else is accomplished, amending the soil is probably the most beneficial feat you can do. The turf area should also be graded to allow excessive water to run offsite to a catch basin or into a rain garden. This will assure that, during wet conditions, the turf will not stay wet for extended periods increasing root loss and disease problems. Again, soil testing is important from the start to assure proper soil chemistry for the turf species you want to grow.

Speaking of turf species, there are four permanent turfgrasses we commonly grow along the coastal plains of the Carolinas. They include centipedegrass, bermudagrass, zoysiagrass and St. Augustinegrass. A relatively unknown turf species is making its way to our southern lawns as well. Seashore paspalum is a turfgrass species that will grow when irrigated with water containing salt at a level that may inhibit other turf species. Seashore paspalum will also thrive under low management regimes. The cool-season grasses, including fescue, ryegrass and bluegrass, will grow in the coastal plains during the winter but often fail as a permanent turf due to the heat and humidity seen during the summer months.

Each of these warm-season turfgrasses also has their own niche in the landscape. Bermudagrass needs full sun, centipede needs good drainage and low maintenance, St. Augustinegrass will grow fairly well in shady conditions but will also thrive in full sun and zoysiagrass will grow almost anywhere conditions are favorable. For more information on which turf will fit your site, contact your local County Extension Office or visit the Home and Garden Information Center at Clemson University

(<http://hgic.clemson.edu>) for extensive writings on turfgrass culture.

Managing a lawn under ideal conditions is relatively easy. However, not many homeowners have this luxury. So, what can you do to achieve a nice lawn under less than perfect conditions? First, have your soil tested to assure the chemistry is OK and check for any physical limitations to your site. This would include compacted soils, poor drainage or wet areas and thatch problems. These problems can be overcome by aerifying, dethatching and topdressing the turf. Second, be sure the turf you have planted in your lawn is of the proper species for that particular site. Finally, be sure you are managing the lawn properly including fertilizing according to soils test reports, mowing at the proper height and watering as needed. If all these fail, contact a turf care professional for further help.

Proper turfgrass selection and soil preparation can help you achieve a healthy lawn thus reducing the need for pesticides. A healthy lawn has always been a recommendation to reducing pest populations and to becoming the envy of the neighborhood.