

Garden Hints

Don't stress out over your lawn this summer

CORVALLIS - Your lawn: it's underfoot, but it's not understood.

Tom Cook, lawn expert at Oregon State University, can help you understand what happens to your lawn during the long dry days of summer, and what you can do about it.

Lawns in western Oregon don't require irrigation to survive, according to Cook. If you don't mind a brown lawn and a few more dandelions most lawns will green up again in the fall when the rains return.

In an average lawn, grass starts growing vigorously in spring producing both new roots and new shoots. When the spring rains subside and the days get warmer, grass slowly uses up soil moisture and new growth slows. As drought continues, older leaf blades die back and your lawn begins to turn brown.

After a long drought there may be a few green shoots attached to especially deep roots and an expanse of apparently dead grass. Unseen are dormant buds that are very drought tolerant. These dormant buds will grow again once adequate water is applied. When fall arrives, a dose of water and fertilizer will encourage recovery.

In general, the healthier the turf is when drought stress begins, the longer the turf will stay green and the better it will weather the drought. Lawns that have lots of thatch will be more likely to die out.

"The worst that will happen if lawns are not watered is that weaker parts of the lawn or areas in hot spots will die," said Cook. "When fall returns lawns can be reseeded and will recover just fine over the winter."

There are consequences to allowing your lawn to go dormant. After a summer of drought, turf density is effectively decreased because not all individual plants in the turf survive. What was once dense turf may become a clumpy stand peppered with invading broadleaf weeds, which are better adapted than ryegrass to prolonged drought. Also, drought may encourage chinch bug activity, but will keep European crane fly populations in check.

Cook offers this advice to those faced with a drought-stressed lawn:

"I would plan on fertilizing in fall with the onset of the rainy season to maximize re-growth of dormant turf. I would consider fall dethatching and overseeding to bolster the turf. In Oregon perennial ryegrass would be my grass of choice since it is quick to establish and has better than average drought tolerance. In the spring, I would monitor my lawn for broadleaf weeds and treat as needed."

And what to do when drought stress is toasting your lawn this summer?

"I would go fishing or play golf and not worry about the lawn."

If a green lawn is what you want this summer, consider Cook's approach to strategic watering.

Decide what parts of your lawn to keep green and to what extent. You may decide to water the front yard and let the backyard go dormant. Perhaps you only want a small green patch near your deck. Water that and let the rest go dormant.

A related strategy is to water only enough to keep the lawn more green than brown. With this approach the lawn is not crispy brown and is generally comfortable underfoot. Cook says he uses a combination of prioritizing lawn areas and practicing subsistence irrigation in his yard.

If your goal is to maintain a dense, green lawn, you will need to water regularly, but certainly not every day.

In hot weather, a Willamette Valley lawn will use about a quarter inch of water per day. In cooler weather it will use as little as a 1/10 inch.

"Blindly irrigating daily generally produces lush green lawns, but invariably applies too much water and grows too much grass," said Cook.

He suggests that you watch your turf for signs of drought stress and wilting. Use a screwdriver to poke in the soil in several places to get a feel for how dry the area is. Moist soil is easy to penetrate while dry soil is as hard as concrete. If the turf looks good and the soil is easily penetrated, you can wait a day and check it again before watering.

Cook says that lawns need less water to stay green once the days get significantly shorter, about mid-August. And he says you can really reduce watering amount and frequency shortly after Labor Day.

In the event of serious drought, you have several options:

- Do nothing but mow your lawn until it is completely dormant. Lawns throughout the Willamette Valley and the coast will recover with the first rains in fall. However, lawns in parts of central, eastern, and southwestern Oregon may not survive if water is withheld for the entire summer period.
- Irrigate your lawn as little as once every two weeks. This will generally keep the lawn alive although not uniformly green, even in the drier parts of Oregon.
- Prioritize the lawn areas. Water small and important areas as needed to provide acceptable turf. Apply minimal water to less important lawn areas and none at all to peripheral areas.
- Remember that most of lawn watering is common sense. Water on days when the weather is really hot. And slack off when it is cooler. And don't forget that even if you don't water at all, your brown lawn will survive and turn green when the rains return.

Garden Hints

OSU offers new pub on maintaining healthy lawns

CORVALLIS - The typical home lawn in western Oregon is an evolving ecosystem that gets more complex each year, according to Tom Cook, Oregon State University Extension turf grass specialist.

"At first, it consists of one or two species of grass found in a typical seed mix, such as Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass," explained Cook. "Over time, it evolves to three or four species that were not part of the original seed mix but are well adapted to the environment. We call this mix of species a 'climax' lawn."

The conversion to a climax lawn is a natural process, and the end result is a lawn adapted to your growing environment, said Cook. But how do you keep your climax lawn from becoming a mix of grass, tap rooted weeds and other undesirables such as moss?

By proper care, he said, through mowing, irrigating, fertilizing and dethatching.

Cook and his OSU Department of Horticulture colleague Ann Marie VanDerZanden have just published a new guide to take the mystery out of maintaining a healthy lawn in western Oregon.

The climate in western Oregon is different from many other areas of the country. Lawn care here is a bit different than that prescribed by writers from other regions.

"Maintaining a Healthy Lawn in Western Oregon," EC 1521, integrates our local prevailing weather patterns and growing conditions with timing recommendations for mowing, watering, fertilizing and dethatching.

For more information on "[Maintaining a Healthy Lawn in Western Oregon](#)," EC 1521, visit our on-line catalog. Our publications and video catalog at: <http://eesc.oregonstate.edu/agcomwebfile/edmat> shows which publications are available on the Web and which can be ordered as printed publications.

Garden Hints

Are leatherjackets munching your lawn?

No, there's not a motorcycle gang having a picnic in your yard. There's a non-native species of crane fly - the European crane fly ("Tipula paludosa") - now found west of the Cascades, whose large leathery larvae feed on plant roots, including the grass in your lawn.

Many people know crane flies as "mosquito hawks" or "Montana mosquitoes." As adults, crane flies are those giant mosquito-like insects that hover about your outdoor lights in the summer and fall.

These leggy flies may look big and scary, but really do no harm as adults, explained Jack DeAngelis, entomologist with the Oregon State University Extension Service. It is the larvae, called 'leatherjackets' by some, that sometimes overwhelm a lawn, pasture or golf course, causing it to die back in patches.

European crane flies lay their eggs in grass in the summer or early fall. The eggs hatch into larvae or maggots, known as 'leatherjackets' because of their gray-brown leathery skin. European crane fly larvae live in the soil and feed voraciously on the roots, shoots and crowns of grass plants during the fall and following spring. Eventually the leatherjackets grow to a whopping inch to an inch-and-a-half long.

Normally, this is not a problem unless, of course, leatherjackets happen to be in dense populations in your lawn, pasture or grass seed field.

"Usually very little damage is done to plants by these creatures, including lawn grasses, because plants have a remarkable ability to compensate for minor root damage," said DeAngelis.

But when the population levels build way up (to more than 25 to 30 larvae per square foot), lawns begin to thin and die back. This dieback is especially noticeable in the spring. Damage can also occur when birds come in and scratch at the lawn surface looking for larvae to eat.

If you suspect leatherjackets have invaded in your lawn, DeAngelis suggests the following:

- Scout your lawn for European crane fly larvae. Spring is the best time, as damaged areas show up the best. Dig a patch of lawn out, about 12 inches square and about two inches deep. Then count the number of leatherjacket larvae you see in this patch. If there are more than 25 of the leatherjacket larvae, you might consider treatment or lawn renovation if your lawn has severe damage. If there are less than 25 per square foot, then your lawn grass can probably outgrow the munching maggots. If you renovate your lawn, it is probably not necessary to treat it with insecticide prior to renovation, said DeAngelis.
- Consult a current edition of OSU's "PNW Insect Control Handbook," on file at local county offices of the OSU Extension Service, for specific control suggestions. The recommended choices for home gardeners include the use of beneficial nematodes or insecticides, available at lawn and garden stores. Fall (October) or spring treatment is

recommended as best. Keep in mind that birds are important predators of crane fly larvae. Take great care not to poison birds if you choose to use insecticides.