

Helping Lawns Adjust to Summer

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Summer weather arrived with a vengeance earlier this month. The mild temperatures and regular rainfall disappeared and daytime highs in the 90s and overnight lows in the 70s were a quick reminder of where we live and what season we are starting. Just as many of us have been struggling to adjust, so are our lawns. Many of them are already showing the impact of less rain and more heat!

The first thing homeowners need to realize is that our cool season grasses, tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass, have a normal habit of going dormant when we have summer temperatures and no rain or irrigation. This is nothing to worry about. When rain returns or if temperatures cool, they will initiate new growth. You don't have to water your lawn if you don't want to. With that said, if we go into an extended drought and we go a month with little rainfall, it is prudent to apply about an inch of water to your dormant lawn. This will keep the crown of that grass plant from dehydrating. It won't be enough to really make it start growing again, you're just keeping the critical portion of that plant alive.

The other thing to keep in mind is that as those crowns dry out, they become more fragile. If the lawn isn't growing, don't keep running over it with a lawn mower, especially a riding lawn mower. The weight can damage those dehydrated crowns. If you have areas, such as around flower beds or vegetable gardens, that are growing because of irrigation applied to those locations, then use a walk behind lawn mower to trim those up. Remember that it is imperative to keep that lawn mowed at 3 to 3.5 inches as the longer leaf blades will shade the soil and keep it cooler. Sunny hot spots along curbs and driveways may also need a little extra moisture as they will dry out faster. Soaker hoses work very well in those locations.

If you do want to keep your lawn green all through the summer, and it doesn't rain an inch a week, irrigation will be required. But please water your lawn correctly. The best way is to irrigate deeply and infrequently. I encourage a deep irrigation of at least one half an inch of water twice a week during the heat of summer. Light waterings every day do far more harm than good. You need to soak up several inches of soil with each irrigation to maintain a good root system. Daily light sprinklings only wet the soil surface which leads to the grass plant developing a lot of roots at the surface which also leads to serious thatch problems over time. You may have to put out rain gauges or even straight sided cans, like tuna cans, to measure how much water you are applying. There are so many variations in sprinkler heads that knowing how many minutes your runs tells you nothing. You need to measure the water being applied in various parts of your lawn.

Timing of the irrigation is also crucial. You want to minimize how long the grass leaves are wet to reduce the risk of disease, especially brown patch. Ideally, sprinklers should be run between 3 and 10 a.m. These are times when the grass will normally be wet anyway. You do NOT want to irrigate in the afternoon or evening. There will be far more loss of water to evaporation and you'll make the grass leaves wet much longer.

With nighttime temperatures over 70 degrees we can expect to see brown patch getting started, especially in irrigated lawns. This normally is not a fatal disease but can make a lawn look really bad for a while. Brown patch is only partially controlled with fungicides and is easier to prevent, with proper watering, than treat!