

Drought Makes For Weakened Bermuda Lawns
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Many new homes have a carpet of Bermuda sod rolled out as a finishing touch before the closing. Unfortunately the new homeowner knows nothing about the soil nutrient level, whether soil was added or lost, and if the soil was properly prepared prior to putting down the sod. Average or above average rainfall can hide poor landscaping practices and keep poorly installed grass alive.

Over the last two summers without the ability to water indiscriminately, our lawns have suffered. The suffering has been worsened by poor maintenance practices, acidic soil, and hard / compacted red clay. Should you plow it up, should you overseed, should you lay new strips of sod?

The lawns I have looked at needed maintenance but none needed replanting or overseeding. If you have at least a 50% stand of live grass over the entire yard it can be brought back to its glory.

First, raise the cutting height of your mower. Allowing the grass to grow a little taller will allow for more photosynthesis to occur and the plant to store greater amounts of carbohydrates in the roots over winter. Remember, if dry weather falls on us again next summer; raise the cutting height of your mower to decrease the water requirements of your grass.

Second, soil sample to determine the current nutrient level. I will bet most poor performing yards have a very acid soil and would benefit from an application of limestone. Limestone to your yard is like Tums to your stomach. Also, Bermuda hay producers have known for year's potassium, the third number on the fertilizer bag, increases winter hardiness of Bermuda grass. Phosphorous, the second number on a fertilizer bag helps with rooting and root formation. September is the month to push root growth and increase winter hardiness. At this time apply a light application of a fertilizer that has minimal nitrogen for green color, but higher amounts of potassium and phosphorous. 10 lbs of 5-10-15 fertilizer applied in early to mid September per 1000 square feet of Bermuda grass would help your lawn recover from dead or thin spots. Do not fertilize Bermuda October through March.

Third, Bermuda sod can be kept alive on concrete with lots of water but it will not thrive. And Bermuda can be kept alive on rocky, compacted, poor red clay, but it will not thrive. If you feel your yard is compacted, or if you park vehicles on the grass, aerating is the only way to increase rooting depth. Aerating is tough on plant roots, but it is good for the soil. Aerate when there is adequate soil moisture to increase disruption but when there are good growing conditions for your Bermuda. Most experts recommend aerating Bermuda grass in May, June, July or August. If you have lots of dead Bermuda I would aerate in September this year to help the roots repopulate dead areas.

Fourth, should you reseed your Bermuda lawn to speed up the recovery period? If your Bermuda lawn was started from sod, it is a hybrid type plant that cannot be established from seed. Hybrid Bermuda produces seed heads but the seed will not germinate. Hybrid Bermuda grass is darker green, denser, finer textured, and has better disease resistance than the seeded “common” Bermuda grass. In addition, the hybrids grow shorter and more compact. So applying common Bermuda seeds in an existing sodded yard will look awkward, something I would compare to the Hi-Low carpet of the seventies.

Bermuda is a great lawn grass but needs some help after the two years of horrible drought. A little maintenance and your yard will look good as new.