

Managing Turf in Drought Situation

Turf serves many purposes in our lives. This green carpet around our homes can increase our home value, decrease air and water pollution and keep our living areas cooler. Turf grass also produces oxygen to breathe and provides a place for our families to enjoy the out-of-doors and to play sports.

Despite recent rains, the drought has not gone away. The current drought has lasted since May 1998 and has depleted soil water supplies and has damaged plants. It will probably take months of adequate rainfall to overcome this deficit. We need to change the way we manage turf in times like these. Grass is mostly water, so how can we manage turf for best performance now? Here are a few tips for you to use.

Soil compaction is a major problem in Middle Georgia. Our soils are easily compacted by construction, foot or vehicle traffic. Use a shovel or metal rod to see if the soil is fairly soft to a depth of eight to twelve inches. If not, you have soil compaction. Hard soils prevent root growth and slow soil water movement.

The best solution for hard soils is to till them. This may not be feasible if grass is already growing there. If most of the turf is dead, or you are just starting over, till the area with a tiller or disk harrow pulled behind a tractor. A device that just has prongs or spikes on it will not do a good job. The soil needs to be soft six to eight inches deep.

Soil sample and, if necessary, lime or fertilize while you are tilling the soil. This is a lot of work but really solves many problems. Correcting low soil pH improves rooting and can help plants use water better. This is especially important on Bermuda grass, Zoysia and St. Augustine. Do not fertilize heavily if the lawn is dry. Fertilizer is a salt requiring water to be active. Fertilizing dry lawns does not help and can hurt. Grade the soil so water runs away from the house. Break up clods and smooth the soil. Plant grass again. The best time to seed is May and June. The best time to sod or sprig is April through August.

If you cannot till, aerate the soil. Rent or buy an aerator that pulls cores out of the soil. Wet the soil deeply and then aerate. Try to penetrate the soil at least three inches deep. Plan to aerate again next year if soils are very hard. Aerate anytime from March through June.

Water infrequently but deeply when you do water. Put out 3/4 to 1 inch of water when the lawn dries out. The grass will turn gray, the leaves will roll up and footprints will remain in the lawn when it is time to water. Healthy lawns should not need watering anymore often than once every five to seven days.

Consider reducing the amount of turf you have. Replace it with mulched beds, ground covers or drought tolerant plants. Be careful not to select some plants that require lots of care or water.

Replace turf you have with a more drought tolerant type. Consider how much light each turf type requires. Here is a comparison of middle Georgia turf types.

Most Drought Tolerant

Least Drought Tolerant

Bermuda grass

Zoysia

St. Augustine

Centipede

Most Shade Tolerant

Least Shade Tolerant

St. Augustine

Zoysia

Centipede

Bermuda grass

Fescue, Blue grass and other cool season grasses are not recommended for middle Georgia. They will not consistently survive middle Georgia summers.