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**AVOIDING LAWN PROBLEMS**

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Besides pouring concrete over everything, what can you do now to avoid problems with your lawn later? The best approach is always to keep your grass, or trees, shrubs, annuals, vegetables, or anything else, as strong and healthy as possible by providing the conditions under which they grow best.

So what do lawns like? Well-drained soil, moisture, sunlight, nutrients, and correct mowing practices. Let’s start with well-drained soil. If water is still puddling on the surface 30 minutes after thoroughly watering your lawn, or getting a soaking rain, there is likely a drainage problem of some sort, which will need investigation with a shovel. Of course, turfgrass likes fertile soil high in organic matter, but it grows fine in the sandy soil that is in much of our area. Soils high in clay, if they do not provide good drainage, may need amending.

It is definitely not true that if some is good, more is better, when it comes to watering the grass. Frequent, light watering often leads to disease problems and shallow, wimpy root systems. Turf with shallow roots is weak and is more susceptible to disease and insect problems and to drought damage. Deep, infrequent watering encourages deeper rooting and turf that is more vigorous, and conditions that do not favor disease.

An established lawn should be watered no more often that once a week; yup, I said once a week, that is it! There is no reason to water more frequently as long as the grass gets a good soaking. Luckily, this lines up with the mandatory water restrictions currently in effect allowing watering only once a week between the hours of 6:00 p.m. and 10:00 a.m. Soil should be allowed to dry out between watering because saturated soil does not have much room for oxygen, and turfgrass roots must have oxygen!

Even weekly watering isn’t necessary much of the time. It is fine, and recommended by some universities, to wait until the grass is showing signs of water stress – for grass, signs are the leaf blades curling, a bluish cast to the grass and footsteps remaining visible after walking across the grass. Then, water enough that the soil is wet 4 to 6 inches down, which will require applying ½ to 1 inch of water (put a rain gauge or straight-sided, short can like a tuna fish can in the grass to determine how much water has been applied, or dig down and see).

Now, I am not holding my turfgrass up as a shining example of a beautiful St. Augustine lawn, but I water my lawn only very occasionally even in the dog days of summer when there hasn’t been rain, and it has survived and without any disease problems. It even looks really good some days.

Obviously, there isn’t a whole lot we can do about sunlight, except to select grass species that prefer the growing conditions we have. St. Augustine is the standard in the area for shady areas, while almost all warm-season grasses do well in full sun. Seashore paspalum is gaining in popularity; it can handle salty soil or water, is more drought tolerant than St. Augustine and can handle more shade than Bermuda.

Not sure which one to choose? Check out the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension website, Aggie Turf, at [www.AggieTurf.tamu.edu](http://www.AggieTurf.tamu.edu), for information about and pictures of many grass species and their varieties, or call the Aransas County Extension office. AggieTurf also has great information on mowing practices, weeds, insects and diseases; be sure to also click on ‘Publications’.

Lawns can get most of the nutrients they need from the grass clippings, which should be left on the grass, and dropped leaves. However, you may want to apply some slow-release fertilizer or compost in the spring or the spring and summer. Follow the directions on any packaged fertilizer for the amount to use (actually it is OK to apply less than listed, but never more). Spread compost on the grass and rake it to spread more evenly. Naturally, you wouldn’t want to apply so much that you cover the grass, but having too much compost is not generally an issue.

Lawns should be mowed frequently (about once a week) and not be cut too short. There are recommended heights for each species; for St. Augustine it is 1.5-3.5 inches tall, and for Seashore Paspalum, Bermuda and Zoysiagrass it is 1–2 inches, Also, as a general rule, no more than 1/3 of the leaf surface should be removed at a mowing.

Keeping your lawn healthy and happy will avoid many problems later.

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