

## Snow Mold

One unexpected consequence of choosing horticulture as a profession is that my neighbors hold me to a much higher (and in my opinion unfair) standard than themselves when it comes to the condition of my yard as compared to theirs. They have especially questioned my abilities over the last couple of years because my lawn has been dead at the edges of my driveway in the spring. The main reason for this though is not due to a lack of care, but to a disease called snow mold caused by a couple of different fungi that can be hard to eliminate from the lawn once present..

There are two types of the snow molds common in Utah: one called pink snow mold and the other gray snow mold. They are usually not too difficult to distinguish between, and the following USU Extension website has useful pictures and information to help determine the differences:

<http://utahpests.usu.edu/plantdiseases/htm/turf/turfdiseases/turfdiseasesimages>. Both can cause extensive damage, especially in shady areas of the yard where snow requires more time to melt off. Snow molds thrive at temperatures just above freezing and do their damage in the winter because they have little to no competition from other microorganisms. Most homeowners are usually unaware they even have this problem until spring because these fungi are hidden under snow cover. Early snowstorms are especially conducive to their growth because the ground is usually not frozen and the combination snow cover and un-frozen grass creates an ideal environment for them. Debris such as leaf litter left on the lawn can also harbor the disease and should be removed on a regular basis. The east and north sides of buildings are also areas where snow mold is very common. Creeping bentgrass, a species commonly used for putting greens on golf courses, is the most susceptible to the disease. Other common lawn grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass, fescues and ryegrasses are less so but still can get it when conditions are right.

There are certain fungicides that can help prevent this problem, but they are very expensive, usually only moderately effective and not recommended for homeowner use. However there are cultural practices that can be followed to prevent the disease. Proper fertilization is very important in keeping the disease at bay. Fall fertilizer applications should be made by late August in Cache Valley. Doing so can reduce symptoms of the disease and speed recover in the spring. However, later fertilizer applications can actually make the problem worse. Regularly mowing the lawn into late fall, when turf is no longer is actively growing, also helps to prevent the disease because it is often worse in grass with longer blades. Pushing snow away from the driveway into sunnier areas of the yard is also helpful. Many golf courses in Northern Utah apply certain organic, granular fertilizers dark in color in early spring to melt snow off faster. Homeowners can also do this, and these organic fertilizers are available from many local farm store and garden centers. An added benefit to these fertilizers is that they are also high in organic matter which benefits the lawn. These fertilizers should still be applied at recommended rates to prevent lawn scorching.

In the spring, if you do find that snow mold has damaged your lawn, rake away all affected grass and throw it away. Mulching or composting it can actually help spread the disease. Fungicide applications at this time are also ineffective because the fungi go dormant during hot weather. If only minor damage is present, the lawn will quickly recover on its own. When moderate to severe damage occurs, reseeding or placing new sod in the area is usually needed.