

Summer Lawn Problems

There are several reasons brown lawns are common during the summer months. However, investigation is needed to pinpoint what may be causing problem.

The most common reason lawns turn brown is drought stress. Common turf grasses in northern Utah naturally go dormant during hot, dry weather as a protective measure. When provided sufficient moisture, they will remain green but growth slows. A few simple steps can be taken to determine drought stress. First, gently but firmly pull on the brown grass. If it is difficult to pull from the soil, it is most likely still rooted. Additionally, try pushing a screwdriver into the soil in the brown area. (This only works in non-rocky soil.) If it is difficult to insert as compared to green areas, this usually indicates drought stress. If grass is growing in rocky soil, it may be necessary to dig a small hole to determine soil moisture.

Another indicator of drought stress is brown spots that appear in rough patterns. Grass may remain green in circular patterns around sprinklers while surrounding grass is brown. Turf in shaded areas additionally may remain green while in hotter areas it browns out.

When grass goes completely dormant (turns brown) due to a lack of water, it can take 3-4 weeks of sufficient irrigation before new, green grass appears. Patience is necessary to revive it. Irrigating above normal water requirements does not revive the lawn more quickly.

To avoid lawn areas going completely dormant, watch for early signs of drought stress. They include Kentucky bluegrass turning a slightly blue or gray color and footprints remain on the lawn after it has been walked on.

Do not increase irrigation time of the entire sprinkling system in an attempt to alleviate a few brown spots. It is best to spot water with a hose sprinkler or be tolerant of a few brown spots. They usually go away when cool weather returns.

Another major reason lawns turn brown is lawn feeding insects. As with determining drought stress, pulling on brown areas of the lawn is useful in determining if insects are the cause. If turf is easily removed with few to no roots, insects may be the cause. When damage is severe, the lawn pulls up almost like a carpet. Common lawn feeding insects include various species of white grubs, billbugs, sod webworm and cranberry girdler. Specific information on these insects can be found at <http://extension.usu.edu/yardandgarden/htm/lawn-care/>. These pests seem to be more common in overly maintained lawns. Over maintenance includes applying too much water and fertilizer and mowing turf excessively short.

When extensive damage occurs, several weeks to months are required for the lawn to recover once insects are controlled. Maintaining a healthy lawn is an effective tool in controlling insect problems. A useful factsheet on lawn maintenance can be found at: http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/HG_517.pdf. When needed, preventative insect

treatments can be applied in the spring. An additional midsummer application may be needed, depending on the pest.