

What's Causing Your Lawn to Turn Brown?

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With summer temperatures rising, many homeowners are noticing brown patches appearing in their lawns. While it's easy to blame the heat, several factors could be contributing to the problem. The three most common causes of browning lawns are drought stress, insect damage, and fungal disease. Understanding the difference can help you take the right steps toward recovery.

Step 1: Check for Moisture

A simple way to test for drought stress is to push a long screwdriver or piece of rebar (at least 6 inches long) into the soil a few hours after watering so that the water has had a chance to soak into the soil. If it slides in easily to a depth of 6 inches or more, your lawn is receiving adequate water. If not, the area may be drying out between irrigation cycles.

In Utah, drought stress is the most common reason for brown lawns. It can result from underwatering, poor sprinkler coverage, broken heads, or clogged filters. Walk your system regularly to check for leaks or clogs and monitor your water meter to ensure it's not indicating a slow leak after irrigation is complete.

Step 2: Inspect the Roots

If drought stress is not the cause of your lawn problems, and the grass lifts easily with little to no root structure attached when pulled, insects such as white grubs, billbugs, or sod webworms may be the cause. These pests are most active from late June through mid-summer.

White grubs and billbugs are challenging to control once symptoms appear. Preventative treatments need to be applied in late spring or early summer. By contrast, sod webworms are easier to manage with post emergence insecticides.

Step 3: Consider Fungal Disease

If the soil is moist and the grass remains well rooted but still looks brown or wilted, a fungal disease may be to blame. Although less common in Utah's dry climate, lawn fungi do occur especially in overwatered lawns with thick thatch

layers or compacted, clay heavy soils. Diseases like summer patches, necrotic ring spot, and Ascochyta are regularly diagnosed in Utah lawns.

Prevention is Key

The good news is that many practices prevent both fungal diseases and insect problems. Water deeply but infrequently—typically two to three times per week and allow the soil to dry moderately between irrigations. Water should reach at least 6 inches deep. Mow at a height of 3 to 4 inches to encourage deeper rooting, which improves drought tolerance and resilience against pests. And aerate every spring if you have clay soil.

Additionally, fertilize the lawn appropriately based on its usage. Lawns that receive heavy use benefit from three to four applications per season. Light use lawns may only need fertilizer in spring and fall. Over-fertilizing can lead to excessive growth, which stresses the plant and makes it more vulnerable to pests and diseases.

For further assistance with lawn diagnostics, contact your local Extension office. We can help you determine the cause and recommend treatment options specific to your situation.