

Ag Column
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Moss In Lawns Often Difficult Situation

One of the more frequent questions lately has been, “What can I do about the moss that is taking over my lawn? There are several reasons for moss in turf. The moss is the symptom not the problem. Moss takes advantage of the situation where there is no longer any grass in shaded areas. Moss favors damp areas where air circulation is limited. Problem areas may also be compacted, poorly drained, infertile or have an incorrect pH. The bottom line is it is very difficult to grow trees and grass together. The massive root systems of trees require large amounts of water often keeping the grass from getting adequate water. Larger mature trees can use up to 100 gallons of water a day during the hotter days of summer.

Moss most often occurs in areas under trees where the turf doesn’t receive good sunlight and airflow. You may say, “but I have moss growing in an area where there aren’t any trees.” Then, you’re area probably tends to stay wet or doesn’t receive good air circulation. The soil probably has a high percentage of clay causing it to be poorly drained.

One of the most important factors is to try to manage your grass correctly with regard to mowing height, fertility, and pH. A soil test every three to four years will insure the fertility and pH stay in the correct range. Fine fescue should be mowed at a height of 2 to 2 ½ inches compared to 3 to 3 ½ inches for tall fescue.

Lawngrass type is critical in shade. A fine fescue instead of tall fescue will be required in shady or limited light situations. Tall fescue will gradually die out in shade. Examples of fine fescue are red fescue, chewings fescue, and hard fescue. When renovating a lawn, it best to overlap seeding of fine and tall fescue and allow the specific environmental conditions dictate which type of grass will perform best.

Improving the penetration of sunlight and airflow into an area will drastically improve the survivability of a turf in shady areas. This can be accomplished by pruning or removing trees. Removing limbs below 10 feet will probably allow adequate light in many situations. Again, managing grass and trees is a difficult proposition.

Over time, the soil may become compacted, reducing the surface and internal drainage. The result will be a soil that tends to stay damp, causing the soil surface to stay wet. This is a great place for moss to become established in the absence of grass. This compaction may be relieved by core aerifying a soil. This is best done in the wetter months of spring or fall to allow good penetration of the aerifier. A core aerifier will actually pull a core of soil and leave it on top of the ground. This is type of aerification is much more beneficial than a spike that is pressed into the ground leaving a hole. A core aerifier can be rented at the usual rental businesses.

If you have the capability of watering your lawn, you should irrigate deeply but infrequently. You should water your lawn when you see signs of drought stress such as foot printing, bluish-gray color, or rolling leaf blades. The soil should be irrigated to a depth of six inches and not irrigated again until the turf shows signs of drought stress. Be

careful to irrigate at a rate the water can be absorbed by the soil and not past the point of runoff.

If you have an area that has a recurrent moss problem, you may want to try a ground cover instead of turf. There are several ground covers that thrive in a shady environment. The ground cover will coexist with the trees better than the turf and maybe even save you some stress. Ground covers can break up the landscape by adding texture and color.

If you are determined to have grass and you have corrected the problems that are favoring moss and algae growth, you can chemically remove these from the soil. Copper sulfate, iron sulfate, ferrous sulfate, sulfate of ammonia, and hydrated lime will provide chemical control. Seed area making sure you achieve seed to soil contact and straw area with 1 and ½ bales per 1000 square feet.

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