

WHAT IS THE DEAL WITH GRASS AND SHADE?

By Ralph E. Mitchell, Director/Horticulture Agent of Charlotte County Extension Service

When we think of a lawn, we often have images of a sunny inviting expanse of green studded with landscape features. What happens when we expect grass to grow in filtered, dappled or full shade? While we cannot expect common grass species to look as good in shade as they do in full sun, certain types of turf and turf cultivars can tolerate some shade and can be managed as useful and ornamental.

First, keep in mind that there are limits as to what grass will take regarding shade. If grass does not get sufficient sunlight, you will notice long, spindly leaves as they attempt to survive. With time, loss of carbohydrates will reduce turf vigor and overall health. If shade is a common denominator in your yard, try an alternative non-turf groundcover that will be better adapted to this condition. Most of our common turf species will need a minimum of six hours of sunlight per day to look good and thrive. Some of this sun can be received in the form of partially filtered light at the edge of trees. Of all the grass species available, certain St Augustine varieties do the best in dealing with moderately shady conditions. As a matter of fact, some types of St. Augustine will tolerate a degree of shade - up to about 30% filtered sunlight. Of all of the cultivars of St. Augustine grass, the most shade tolerant are

'Seville', 'Delmar', 'Floraverde' and 'Captiva'. These cultivars are noted as being able to do well with five to six hours of sunlight per day. Consider that our most commonly used St. Augustine grass; 'Floritam' has poor shade tolerance and really needs six to eight hours of light.

The other common grass species available have only moderate to poor shade tolerance. Zoysia grass such as 'Empire' has a moderate shade tolerance close to 'Floritam'. Bahia grass and Bermuda grass will not tolerate shade at all.

There are some management practices that can enhance the tolerance of shade-tolerant grass in your landscape. Remember that the lack of light is a stress on grass that we must try to reduce or limit. For instance, increase your mowing height. This action will not only leave more grass blade and the ability to absorb light, but it will also influence the grass to develop deeper roots. Grass that is growing in the shade needs less fertilizer. Less nitrogen fertilizer in a slow-release form will accomplish this goal. Water less in shade areas. Water only as needed (when the lawn shows symptoms of water stress) and in compliance with your local watering restrictions. Keep traffic on your shaded lawn to a mini-



mum. Grass grown in shade may not recover as quickly as grass in the sun. Grass grown in shade may also be more open to weed invasion as it is weaker and has less density. Perhaps the biggest problem faced in a shaded lawn is the competition from trees in the landscape. Trees have extensive and aggressive roots that will take up space, water, oxygen and nutrients. This competition will affect grass growth. Removal of trees or trimming may help alleviate this issue.

While our local grasses will grow best in full sun, sometimes there are areas in our landscape that are shaded or partially shaded creating a challenging growing condition. Selecting the right grass, and using proper management techniques, will help assist you in doing the best in up to 30% shade - it can be done!

Resource:

Trenholm, L.E. (2008) Growing Turfgrass in the Shade. UF/IFAS Extension Service.

For more information on all types of lawn questions, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm-4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our Plant Clinics are available across the county:

- **Demonstration Garden** (6900 Florida Street, PG) Thursdays 9:00am-11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** Thursdays 10:00am-1:00pm.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1st and 3rd Thursday of month 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3rd Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.
- **South Gulf Cove Learning Garden** 3rd Wednesday of month 9:00am-12:00pm.

Monthly Plant Clinics are Saturdays 9:00am-12:00pm at the following locations:

- **Peachland Promenades Publix** 2nd Saturday of month.
- **Home Depot Murdock & Home Depot Punta Gorda** 3rd Saturday of month.
- **Lowe's Garden Center Murdock** 4th Saturday of month.

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For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4340. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.