

IS YOUR LAWN STRESSED?

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Is your St. Augustine tired and off-color? Has your Bahia grass seen better days? Your lawn may in fact be stressed. So, before you get stressed about your lawn, read on to find out what you can do to have a sustainable and, yes, stress-free lawn!

Step number one in maintaining a stress-free lawn is to fertilize properly. Plants such as grass use photosynthesis to make food in the form of carbohydrates. These carbohydrates help grass ward off and recover from stress. However, if fertilizer high in nitrogen is applied in excess, excess growth occurs and much of the stored energy is used up in this effort. This may affect turf density and allow weeds to encroach. It may also affect spring green-up.

The second step in keeping your lawn stress-free is to mow high. For instance, most St. Augustine cultivars and all Bahia grass should be mowed at three and one-half to four inches in height. Keeping the mowing height at the highest level possible will increase the grass's ability to photosynthesize. Mowing too low forces the grass to put its energy into re-growing blade tissue thus opening the plant up to stress. As a rule-of-thumb, make sure to never remove any more than one-third of the grass blade at any one cutting.

The remainder of the steps to reduce stress include proper irrigation, avoiding excessive foot or vehicle traffic over the lawn, and reducing shade if possible. These are all above-ground practices to keep the grass blades in good shape. The roots also need some attention to help reduce stress. A deep and healthy root system is needed to tap into water and nutrients as well as supply carbohydrates. Too much nitrogen will force grass blades to grow faster than the roots. Mowing too short will also have an effect on the roots. If for example a lawn is "scalped", the grass will grow new blade tissue at the expense of root growth. Proper irrigation will also have a beneficial effect on grass roots. If grass is irrigated too much, a shallow root system will develop resulting in reduced drought tolerance. We

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really want to "train" turf to have deep roots which not only are better able to find water, but also nutrients.

Besides nitrogen, other nutrients are essential for proper turf growth. Phosphorus is known to help with the establishment of new lawns. Most of our soils already have plenty of P present. Also keep in mind that according to a state rule, no more than one-quarter pound of P can be applied per 1,000 square feet per application with a limit of one-half pound for the whole year. A soil test can give you the best determination for the need of this nutrient. Potassium is also an essential nutrient that helps to reduce stress factors such as cold temperatures, drought and traffic issues. A fall application of K within a balanced fertilizer mix has been known to provide good spring green-up results.

We need to give our lawns every chance to withstand stress which will in turn provide protection against insect pests, disease and weeds reducing the need for pesticide applications.

Resource:

Trenholm, L.E. (2008) Environmental Stresses and Your Florida Lawn. UF/IFAS Extension Service.

For more information on other turf topics, 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.

MONTHLY PLANT CLINICS ARE SATURDAYS FROM 9:00AM-12:00PM.

- **Powell's Nursery** 1st Saturday of month
- **Peachland Publix**..... 2nd Saturday of month
- **Home Depot (Punta Gorda, Port Charlotte, Englewood)** 3rd Saturday of month
- **Lowes** 4th Saturday of month

PLANT CLINICS 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.
- **Punta Gorda Library** 2nd and 4th Wednesday of month from 10:00am-1:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3rd Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.
- **South Gulf Cove Learning Garden** (13577 Blake Drive, PC) 3rd Wednesday of month from 9:00am-12:00pm.

Ralph Mitchell (Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com) is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for Charlotte County Extension Service. Contact a volunteer Master Gardener from 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by email (Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4351. 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.