Moss

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A very common question I get is about moss on the home lawn. There are all sorts of explanations I get on why the moss is “crowding out” their grass. It is not doing that. It is simply taking advantage of a poor grass growing situation to flourish.

Most of the time the problem is shade. Grass does not grow in the heavy shade of a maple tree. A line I use when I do programs is," grass does not grow in woods and trees do not grow on the prairie." Grass needs sunlight to flourish. Even though you can find shady varieties of lawn grasses that are more tolerant to the shade, they still need some sun.

Mosses are small plants that look like a mass of fine stems that grow in a variety of conditions ranging from very wet to dry soils. They vary in size and are without a root system, but grow root-like filaments that attach to the soil or other substratum. I remember seeing a beautiful miniature Japanese garden created with several unique species of moss. There are about 12,000 species of moss in this world, so a knowledgeable and creative person could develop a magnificent landscape.

Mosses can invade lawns with low fertility, poor drainage, heavy shade, soil compaction, poor air circulation, or a combination of these factors. Under poor growing conditions, moss plants are able to compete against turfgrass and infest thin lawns due to these poor growing conditions. Mosses are not harmful but many homeowners desire a thicker stand of turf vs. moss in their lawns.

Many people associate moss with a low pH. Their quick answer is to apply lime to the lawn. Unfortunately, lime seems to be man’s cure-all for many things, but it is not. Rarely does a lawn need lime. Even though it is cheap, you are still wasting money. On top of that, the lime is raising the pH of a lawn to over a 7.0 in acid-base balance. This makes the iron less available and decreases the dark green color of the lawn. Good ole, all-natural lime is probably the most abused product in a garden store.

The only permanent way to control moss in turf areas is to correct poor growing conditions causing the moss to overcome the turfgrasses. The following lawn maintenance practices will help control moss infestations:

Fertilize lawns at least once per year. September is the prime time to fertilize turf for recovery from summer stress and to maintain a dense, green, deeply rooted turf with optimum energy reserves for future growth.

Increase air circulation. Areas surrounded by trees may block air circulation over the turf. Pruning tree limbs or removing plants when feasible may help increase air movement over turf plants and help dry the soil surface.

Provide more light. Growing turf in the dense shade can be very challenging and this situation often forces the homeowner to choose between growing turf or trees. When practical, remove trees or prune tree limbs to provide more light to the turf. In many cases and when soil drainage is adequate, homeowners may choose to grow an alternative ornamental plant like a shade-loving groundcover, perennial or annual flowers suitable for dense shade.

Aerate or cultivate compacted soil. Many moss species are adapted to compacted soil conditions but turfgrass plants are not. Therefore, cultivating the soil through the use of a hollow-tine core aerator can help loosen the soil and relieve compaction.

Seed areas to reestablish turf. Seed shade-adapted species under shade trees in thinned lawns. Use fine fescue species such as creeping red fescue, Chewings fescue, and hard fescue under shade trees in lawns. Late summer and early fall seeding dates have the best chance of establishing because they will provide the longest exposure to direct light during the fall before the tree’s deciduous foliage returns the next spring.

When you go to a golf course or athletic field, you are not going to see moss. Improve the culture of your lawn and the moss will just go away. That would be a great Sherlock Holmes story, “The case of the fading moss.”