Repairing Lawn Areas
By Terry Brite DelValle
Special to the Times-Union for 4/13/09

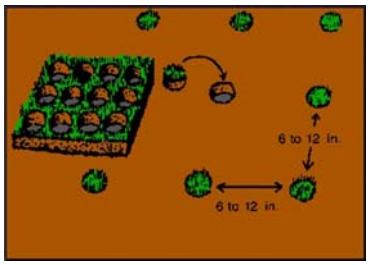
The winter of 2008/2009 will be remembered as an unusually cold winter and landscapes are now telling the story. Homeowners are busy trying to replace dead plants and repair lawn areas and hopefully, the cold is behind us.

Pest Control Companies and the Extension Office have been inundated with phone calls regarding dead areas in lawns. Everyone is quick to blame someone but the truth of the matter is that no one had control over the weather and the amount of winter kill to lawns.

Based on my neighborhood, most of the damage occurred to turf in open areas with no protection from frosts or low temperatures. Lawn areas beneath a tree canopy, between buildings or next to water bodies faired much better because they got some protection from the cold. One lawn may be damaged whereas the one next door may be fine. There are lots of variables that affect cold hardiness such as the type of lawn and variety, soils, mowing height, etc. Also, new lawns installed in late August or later did not fair well as cold weather occurred so early this year that lawns did not have sufficient time to establish.

According to University of Florida Turfgrass Specialist Bryan Unruh, winter injury is a very complex and poorly understood phenomenon in turf. It is not only related to low temperature but also to fertilization rate (individual applications and seasonal quantities), state of hydration at the time of low temperatures, and perhaps most important is the number of times that it greens and re-greens throughout the winter months. Warm temperatures are often followed by cold creating a roller coaster of temperature fluctuations. As a result, the stored carbohydrates in lawns dwindle and are depleted when spring rolls around. Based on this information, it would be difficult to blame any one thing for the damage we experienced this year.

If you have dead areas in the lawn, it's time to move on and repair them. If the dead areas are small, gently rake out the damaged turf so the surrounding lawn can fill in the gaps. If the areas are large, use a garden rake to remove the dead material; then loosen and level the existing soil. The exception is if using sod, the soil should be lower so the new sod is flush with the existing sod.



Depending on the type of grass, replace with sod, plugs, or seed. St. Augustine, Zoysia, Centipede, Bahia, and Bermuda lawns can be planted as sod and/or plugs versus Centipede, Common Bermuda, and Bahia can also be grown from seed. Plugs, sod, and seed are readily available at sod nurseries or garden centers. Don't mix different grasses in the same lawn because the growing requirements are not the same. Also, try to match the variety with what you currently

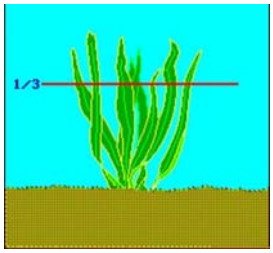
have unless you are dissatisfied with the existing lawn. For example, Floratam, Delmar, Palmetto, Bitterblue, Captiva, Seville, and Classic are all St. Augustinegrass varieties.

If you are unable to match the variety, make your own plugs by cutting out sections with a shovel or a special steel plugger. Plugs are typically spaced six to twelve inches apart but can be spaced closer so the bare areas will fill in quicker to reduce weed problems. Store-bought plugs will establish sooner because they have a more developed root system.

Seed should be applied evenly, lightly raked into the soil and/or covered with a thin layer of topsoil, and then rolled to insure seed to soil contact. Cover the seeded area with a thin layer of mulch to prevent seedlings from drying out. For more detailed information on planting a lawn, go to http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/document_lh032.

Watering is the next critical stage to the success of the new sod, plugs, or seed. Keep the area moist by applying small quantities of water several times each day for about two weeks. Do not turn the sprinkler on and let it run constantly as this keeps the area too wet, promotes disease problems, and wastes water. After the seedlings emerge or the sod starts to grow and take root, reduce the irrigation frequency but increase the amount. Once established, apply between ½ to ¾ inch water when you run the irrigation system to encourage a deep root system.

Add fertilizer to new seedlings one week after they emerge. For sod or plugs, fertilize every two to three weeks until the grass begins to spread. Apply ½ to one pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet of lawn area using a 16-4-8 or 16-2-16 type fertilizer. Remember, we have a statewide Urban Turf Fertilizer Rule and a Duval County Fertilizer Ordinance which limits the amounts of nitrogen and phosphorous that can be applied per application and cumulatively for the year. For more information on fertilizers, refer to http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP221.



As grass reaches over 30% the desired height, start mowing. Remove no more than 1/3rd of the height at each mowing. Research the proper mowing height for your specific variety and avoid mowing the lawn too short (http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/document_lh028).

Once warmer weather sets in, the warm season lawns should flourish if provided with adequate rainfall. Follow good cultural practices to create a healthy lawn that will be more tolerant of cold weather next year.