Control Thatch Buildup

Helpful Advice on How to Have a Healthy Yard

What is it?

The cause of thatch is one of gardening's biggest misconceptions. Thatch is the "build up" between the crowns of the grass plant and the soil derived from the grass stems, roots and lower blades. It is not caused by bagging grass clippings or mulching by a mower. When sod is laid over hard clay's final grade, the turf stresses almost immediately on the cement like soil. Rooting is difficult and some grass plants die within days or weeks. Most new lawns are poorly rooted even after three to five years and have severe thatch.

Sod producers grow cultivars with thick cell walls that are high in legin which gives them excellent tolerance and stem strength. This same thick cell wall resists decomposition if a plant dies. The build up of this resistant tissue becomes almost like sedimentary rock and is very detrimental to healthy turf. A thin thatch layer less than ½" can be beneficial because it increases the turfs resiliency, improves its wear tolerance and insulates against soil temperate changes.

Turf with harmful levels of thatch feels underfoot like extremely plush carpet. Some of the negative effects of such thatch are poor water penetration, fast run off, increased fungus activity, areas that scalp when mowed, short term results from fertilization and poor control from insecticide application.

Treatment Options

For years, power raking was considered the best approach to thatch control. Today we realize core application is a far superior method. Deep core aeration done in a double or triple pass pattern in spring and again in late summer to early fall is the best way of exposing the thatch layer and opening the soil for treatment. The time to begin a program of thatch breakdown is in mid to late August. Mow the turf to 2" then aerate and apply a unique all natural granulated humate material called Natural Guard Soil Activator. This product essentially composts the thatch. In addition to reducing the thatch, it improves the structure of the hard clay soil. Use in conjunction with our fertilizer program.

Outstanding results occur when Soil Activator is used with an organic fertilizer such as Pro Rich or Milorganite. The organic Soil Activator works best when soil temperatures are warm. It can be used with your favorite turf fertilizer such as Lanoha's Premium Lawn Food.

If thatch is over one inch thick, use this special activator both in the spring and early fall for at least 2-3 seasons. After that, thatch should have shrunk to an acceptable 1/2" or less. A maintenance program of a single application every other year should be adequate.

The proper turf grass and maintenance can minimize thatch accumulation. Proper mowing frequency and height are practices that can reduce the tendency. No more that 1/3 of the leaf blade should be removed with any mowing. Apply fertilizers using rates and programs that meet the nutritional needs of the turf and avoid light and frequent irrigation.

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