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Winter Lawn Disease: Pink Snow Mold

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Feeling a little under the weather lately? Your lawn may be too! Lawn diseases can occur at any time of the year. Most lawn diseases are caused by fungi (not bacteria or viruses) and unfortunately for us there are fungi that thrive in spring, summer, fall, and winter. Whether your lawn picks up a disease or not depends if the fungus is present in the soil or if it is brought onto the lawn plus weather conditions have to be just right.

Now that winter is really here, some cold weather diseases have shown up rather suddenly. The MG offices have received several calls recently from homeowners complaining about numerous small dead spots in the lawn.

Pink snow mold: The most common disease that we can expect to see right now is officially called *Microdochium* patch. It was formerly called *Fusarium* patch and if you live in areas that receive snowfall, the disease is commonly called pink snow mold. The name comes from the pinkish tinge of the fungus on the leaf blades. The fungus can attack turfgrasses underneath the snow cover, causing considerable damage. However this disease also occurs during periods of cool, wet weather in California that receive no snow. The presence of dead, water soaked plants covered with white to pink spore masses plus a dark appearance to the edge of the patch are tell-tale signs and symptoms for this disease.



Pink snow mold damage on cool season lawn.

Disease source: The fungal pathogen (*Microdochium nivale*) can be active across a broad range of cooler temperatures (32° to 65°F), but air temperatures above 70°F inhibit the growth of the fungus and can shut down the progression of the disease. When the grass surface dries out and the weather warms, snow mold fungi cease to attack; however, infection can reappear in the area year after year.

Turfgrass susceptibility: Many kinds of lawn grasses are susceptible including annual and Kentucky bluegrasses, bentgrasses, fescues, and ryegrasses. Bentgrasses (these are often used on golf course greens) and bluegrasses are particularly susceptible to *Microdochium* patch disease. It does not show up in bermudagrass lawns unless they have been overseeded with some of the cool season grasses just mentioned.

Symptoms: In the absence of snow, patches initially appear as small, water-soaked spots about 2 inches in diameter. The fungus grows slowly in the initial stages of development. If conditions are favorable, disease can spread easily. The spots eventually enlarge and ring-like dead patches with a whitish to pink color may appear. The color is attributed to the mycelial strands (web like strings) and spore masses of the

fungus. The grass plants are usually brown. The fungus produces a lot of spores that are easily carried to other parts of the lawn by equipment, animals, people or wind. In severe cases lawnmower wheels have left tracks of dead grass in their path.

Factors favoring the disease: Disease is most serious when air movement and soil drainage are poor and the grass stays wet for long periods, e.g., when fog persists for most of the day. Besides the cool wet weather, snow mold diseases are favored by alkaline soil conditions, excessive early fall applications of fast release nitrogenous fertilizers, heavy shade, and thatch greater than $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick.

Modify cultural practices: Well we can't do much about the fog or rain, is there anything that we can do about the disease? Providing good soil aeration and water drainage and reducing shade can discourage the incidence of Microdochium patch. Avoid keeping the soil too wet by reducing or eliminating sprinkler irrigation. Try to time your last fall fertilizer application at least four weeks before the onset of cold temperatures. Even better, use slow-release fertilizers, which release nitrogen slowly over a period of time. If you have an alkaline soil, your turf may benefit from applications of sulfur to bring the soil to a more acidic pH. Researchers are finding that fertilizers containing potassium may help suppress the disease.

Fungicides: If you have had trouble with this disease in the past, then modify your cultural practices and consider treating your lawn with a fungicide before the onset of winter weather. Fungicides are protectants, not eradicants. Several applications through the winter will be needed to protect your lawn. There are many brand names available than are listed here, just be sure they contain the following active ingredients: chlorthalonil (Ortho Multipurpose Fungicide), myclobutanil (Green Light fung-away), propiconazole (Ortho Lawn Disease Control) and thiophanate-methyl (Fungo-flo). Always be sure to read and follow all label directions.

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