

Here' What to Do for Your Lawn's Brown Patches

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, July 16, 2018

Q: I have a couple of big brown spots in my lawn. Can you tell me what is wrong with my lawn?

A: I need to ask you several questions about your lawn before I can determine what might be the cause of the brown spots. What type of lawn do you have? Is your lawn a cool season lawn, such as a fescue blue grass mix, or is a warm season Bermuda grass lawn? Do you have grassy weeds in the lawn, especially in the brown spots, or is it all the same species of grass? Many lawns will get poa annua grass as a weed in the lawn and this will start to yellow and then turn brown as soon as it gets hot. Another possible cause of grass browning is that you have an uneven mix of grass species in your lawn. Fine fescues like more shade and if in large patches in the full sun may show up as brown patches in the heat of summer.



Brown spots on a lawn are a symptom of many possible problems. (Photo: Jessica Skropanic, Redding Record Searchlight)

Have you run your irrigation system and checked to make sure the brown spots are getting water? And if so, are they getting the same amount of water as the rest of the lawn? Or are they in an area where the sprinkler spray does not overlap and therefore the brown spots are getting less water than the rest of the grass? Uneven watering is the most common cause of brown spots in the lawn, especially when

it starts to get hot. When you run the system you may find that the sprinkler system misses spots or the sprinkler system does not have head to head coverage — the stream from one sprinkler should reach the head of the one opposite to it and vice versa — so areas of the lawn get less water.

Grubs or cutworms eating the roots or base of the grass could also cause brown patches to appear in the lawn. Have you checked to see if the grass in the brown areas is well rooted? You can do this by pulling on the grass in these areas. Another way to detect grubs or worms is to perform a drench test on areas of the lawn that may have some damage but are not yet brown. The UC Healthy Lawns website at <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/TOOLS/TURF/> provides these directions for a drench test:

“To detect chinch bugs, adult billbugs, and caterpillars, including armyworms, cutworms, and larvae of lawn moths (sod webworms), perform a drench test by mixing one to two fluid ounces (two to four tablespoons) of dishwashing liquid to a gallon of water. If you are using a concentrated version of a dishwashing liquid, 1½ tablespoons per gallon of water is adequate. Two gallons may be required where soils are dry. Apply the solution to 1 square yard of lawn as evenly as possible using a sprinkling can. Test an area that includes both relatively healthy grass and adjoining unhealthy grass. The drench will cause insects to move to the surface. During the next 10 minutes, identify and count the number of pest insects.”

Other possible causes of brown spots can be fungal diseases or pet urine, but I would eliminate the causes above before exploring these possibilities.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.