

Brown Spots On Lawn May Signal Wrong Plant Choices

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Aug. 9, 2019



There are many causes of brown spots on lawns. Which is causing yours? (Photo: Jessica Skropanic, Redding Record Searchlight)

Q. In the last couple of weeks I have noticed unsightly brown spots on my lawn. Could insects be causing this?

A. It's possible but not the most common reason for brown spots on lawns.

According to the UC Davis Integrated Pest Management site, insects don't commonly cause damage to California lawns. We do get occasional grubs, cut worms or sod web worms but they are not as common as they are in other regions. It is easy to determine if you have insects by closely examining the area directly surrounding the brown area for evidence of insects or insect damage on the grass blades. Pulling on the brown clumps of grass to determine if they still have roots will assess if you have grubs; if the clumps come up easily with little roots you may have grubs.

The more likely causes of your brown spots include growing inappropriate grass species for our area, improper watering, poor lawn care, fungal disease, chemicals and dog urine.

This time of year, the number one cause of brown spots in lawn is irrigation. Either over or under watering, or watering in the evening. The best practice is to run irrigation in the early morning and to water deeply and not to water every day. If you have been watering every day, you will need to slowly transition to watering less frequently as grass needs time to grow deeper roots to handle the longer time between irrigations.



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

Another common problem is one or more of the sprinkler heads are out of alignment or not working properly. Check your sprinkler heads to see that they're functioning properly and covering the areas that are showing up brown. Sprinkler heads should have head to head coverage, meaning that the stream of water from a sprinkler head on one side of the lawn should reach the one across from it and vice versa.

Many times sprinkler heads will get pushed down when the mower runs over them and will not pop-up high enough to reach above the grass or over to the other sprinkler heads.

One of the other common reasons for brown or yellow spots in the lawn is that you have a poa annua grass or annual rye grass that has grown in that part of the lawn. It looks nice and green during the cool season but once it gets warm it starts to yellow and then brown as it cannot take the heat.

Assuming you have a fescue mix lawn and not a Bermuda grass lawn, brown spots can be over seeded in late fall or early spring with a fescue mix. Make sure the mix is a quality seed mix that does not have weed seed and rake the seed into the brown patches, cover lightly with a light application of compost and then keep moist until grass starts to grow. After that you can treat it like you would the rest of your lawn.

To maintain a healthy lawn, mow so that you cut no more than 1/3 of the grass's height each time and keep your blade sharp. Make sure you are leaving the grass at the recommended height for the species of grass you are growing. Aerate and de-thatch periodically.

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.