Grass 911: Help, My Lawn Is Orange

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Jan. 31, 2020

There are several causes of brown and orange spots on lawns. Which is causing yours? (Photo: Jessica Skropanic, Redding RS)

Q. My lawn needs serious help. It has large orange patches and two areas that show bare soil. What can I do to make my lawn look better?

A. It sounds like you might have a fungal disease called rust that is making the blades of your grass orange, but I would also want to know a bit more about the care you give your lawn, such as when you fertilize and how often you mow.

Without making a specific diagnosis I can give you some common issues that may cause the lawn to look poorly.

I will assume that you're like most of us in Northern California, and growing a tall fescue blended with bluegrass, or fine fescues. These are cool season turfgrass, which grow most vigorously in the spring and fall and are somewhat dormant, but do not turn brown, during winter and summer.

The orange color on your grass is most likely from a rust fungi. The warmer weather we had in December created the perfect conditions for this type of fungi to start growing. Grass is more susceptible to a rust infection if it's nitrogen deficient, so fertilizing will help it recover. Spring and early fall is the best time to fertilize cool season lawns. Late spring and summer is the better time if you have a warm season lawn such as Bermuda grass.

Most often the lawn will need only nitrogen. There will be sufficient phosphorus, potassium and other nutrients in the soil.

There are many fertilizers to choose from, but at this time of year, when soil temperatures are cool, you want to choose one that says it performs well in winter or has a nitrate form of nitrogen. Soil microbes are needed to convert ammonia-based nitrogen to a nitrate form that plant roots can utilize, and these are not active in cold soils. If you apply nitrogen in the form of ammonium, it will not be used by the plant and may be washed into area streams or leach into the groundwater, causing damage to the environment.

Most lawns need four to six pounds of actual nitrogen applied per thousand square feet during the active growing times. Apply no more than one pound of nitrogen (N) per thousand square feet per application. One pound of N would equal 4.8 pounds of a fertilizer that is 21-0-0.

If you "grasscycle" — leave the grass clippings on the lawn when you mow — you'll take care of 30% of your fertilizer needs. You want to fertilize when the grass is dry and then water in the fertilizer.

Improper watering is one reason for bare patches of lawn, especially if there's no obvious cause of the bare soil, such as a dog digging.

It doesn't seem like we should be worrying about irrigation now, but we had dry conditions up until a few weeks ago and that may be when your grass started to die.

Check your irrigation system to make sure that it's working properly. Run the irrigation system long enough to ensure that you do not have water running off from your yard. If there is runoff after just a few minutes, this could indicate that dethatching is needed.

For more information about lawn care see the UC Healthy Lawns site at http://ipm.ucanr.edu/TOOLS/TURF/MAINTAIN/index.htm.

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.