

The Grass Profession

Hey Turf Guy my lawn has brown patches. What's going on?

Before I tackle such a challenging question it might be worthwhile to present my credentials. At the present time I am the Executive Director for the Midwest Sod Council and the Fundraising Director of the International Turf Producers Foundation. During my career I have also been a Golf Course Superintendent/General Manager and a College Turfgrass Professor. I tell you all this so I can tell you this: I am a turfgrass expert, more exactly, a turfgrass sod expert. I share this with you not because I proclaim it to be so, but because everyone else believes it to be true. That being the case one can only assume that it must be true. Of course, since others have such a flattering perception of who and what I am, it also creates a dilemma of sorts. Such a distinction can also mean different things to different people. To some I am a guru, a wizard with problem-solving solutions, the all knowing Carnac the Magnificent, but to most I am just a schmuck who has wasted most of his life on grass (if you don't believe me just talk to my wife). But alas I say, let us pause and consider Grass. That's it! Grass — take a moment to think about it.

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Most of you who are reading this article are no doubt in the same situation as mine. Because of your impressive background, your current title, the scope of your responsibilities, your unlimited experience and thirst for knowledge, you are expected to have a perfect lawn (many of you may know I chose to live in a townhouse at the start of my career). As an all-knowing guru you are expected to have all the answers. You are expected to dispense your knowledge and profound wisdom freely and openly. Did I mention my neighbor is an accountant? I don't ask him to stop over and help with my taxes. Another neighbor is a mechanic. But I have never once had him come over and jack up the ol' car and do an oil change. And yet, why is it that without fail every summer (and most springs and falls) I get quizzed and interrogated like an undergraduate at the close of a semester. "I have a problem." "Look at this." "What is this?" "What caused this?" "How can I prevent this?" And my personal favorite, "Have you ever seen anything like this before?" These are the easy ones. I can physically see the problem. I can watch how they do things. I have a clue before they even call me as to what the problem might be because I have seen the lawn and I am naturally inquisitive. This is not the case with the rest of my "consulting" work. Every summer I get phone calls from my college roommate in Michigan. "Hey Turf Guy my lawn has brown patches. What's going on?" is the query from 300 miles away. How the hell do I know? But I try to appease him. We do a run down of weather and fertilizer applications, mowing and pet traffic. I come to an answer, and he hangs up. I am probably seldom correct, but it is Kentucky bluegrass, it will grow back. Or better yet, I can get him in touch with one of my sod farm friends who can redo my distant friend's yard. Although I try to explain to neighbors, relatives, co-workers and former college roommates that it is impossible to diagnose the problem over the telephone, the calls continue year after year much like the seasons that come and go. Ever try getting a prescription from your doctor over the phone? "I have this rash on my thigh. It kind of oozes and weeps a yellow substance. Is this normal? Did I mention I just got home from Bangladesh?" This one will take an office visit.

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To the rest I am a schmuck.

My brother has a Ph.D. in toxicology. He is one of 200 people in the world certified to do what he does (whatever that is). Apparently he is in the top of that very elite group. He is working on cures for Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. His is an admirable profession. I, on the other hand, work in turfgrass management. He went to school for eight years. He travels to Germany and Japan on a regular basis. Imagine our family get-togethers during the holidays. My brother shares his colorful tales about his exciting exploits and me, I'll mumble a bit reminding everyone that he still hasn't found a cure for anything and he has been doing this for 10 years! As he shares his attention-grabbing tales of exotic travels I field the lawn questions from my uncles, aunts, cousins and family acquaintances who want to know about the cause of a dead spot of unknown origin somewhere on their lawn. Regardless of my efforts, I always end up looking like a dolt, because I can't diagnose what I can't

see. "Yeah, uh thanks Rusty, I think we're just going to go over and listen to your brother tell that story about the time he was in Tokyo and . . ." Do I sound frustrated, rejected, or in need of attention? Sorry 'bout that but it's just that I spent four years getting a great education, and I can't answer seemingly simple questions I get from my relatives about their grass. Maybe I need a refresher course! Sensitive you say! Nope, I could bring up a hundred other examples from social gatherings that would reinforce my point. Those casual exchanges that usually start with "You do what?" or "You can get a degree in that?" Most of the time they end with "Guess there's more to it than I thought," but sometimes they finish with shaking heads or laughter. After all I have wasted most of my life working with grass. It's enough to make a guy feel like Charlie Brown.

Beyond my family and friends there is another group of people who think I am a schmuck. Many of these people would classify themselves as

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environmentalists or ecologists. Now that's not necessarily how I would classify them, but that's how they might classify themselves. Most are patently against the idea of turfgrass because it is not native (except for a few species) and it requires fertilizers, pesticides, and water. These people often see a manicured lawn as an opulent possession and golf as a game for the elite. If you are a French aristocrat please don't take it personally

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that's just the way it is. These same people may also have tall prairie grass in their yards, an old windmill, or maybe a few bison roaming around their front lawn. They are proud to fight any city or village ordinance that says you have to mow your lawn. But, I'll tell you this, these people do not know what I know, and they don't believe what I believe. Having gone through my few minutes of emotional therapy by writing this article, I thought I would now share a few thoughts with you in hopes that it might prove beneficial. If you need the citations, sources, research data, verifications, scientific journals, or back issues of Mad magazine that support the information that is to follow, let me know, give me a call, send me an e-mail, whatever, and I will get the information to you.

What I do know?

- Almost every great experience I can remember in my life has a link to turfgrass.
- The turfgrass industry is doing all it can to make sure that the benefits of grass are amplified and that the

drawbacks are eliminated through extensive research.

- A healthy lawn is a boon to the environment, cleaning up air and noise pollution.
- With a little training anyone can grow a healthy lawn with limited inputs.
- A pesticide is anything that kills a pest. Antibacterial soap is a pesticide! Ask the neighbors complaining about your spray rig about the pesticides within their homes.
- Water in streams, rivers, and creeks often leaves a golf course property cleaner than on its way in.
- You can't play golf, baseball, football, or soccer effectively in a tall grass prairie (I usually throw in Disc Golf for this group because they understand that).
- A turfgrass lawn is a better sequester of carbon than a forest environment (This could reduce global warming).
- Turfgrass controls soil erosion better than any other living ground cover.
- Turfgrass cools the atmosphere and decreases the urban heat-island effect.
- Turfgrass produces pure oxygen for us to breathe.

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*I cannot imagine
a world without
turfgrass.*



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- A water retention swale or “Rain Garden” with established turf will retain more water and have less soil erosion than one with established prairie plants.
- Turfgrass is softer than artificial turf and better for the participants (it also won’t go in the landfill when its life is over).
- Having a healthy green surrounding enhances physical well-being.
- A properly cared for lawn enhances property values.
- A new study shows that having a nice lawn could improve your social life!
- I cannot imagine a world without turfgrass.
- I like the way the grass feels between my toes.
- Sod is the quickest easiest way to get all of these benefits.
- I will continue working to ensure that turfgrass is used in every area that benefits our environment and our lives.
- I am proud to be a turfgrass management professional.

What I believe.

- Fewer turfgrass lawns = more fat children.
- If environmentalists would educate themselves they would be in favor of turfgrass and of educating homeowners about its care.
- No child should be expected to play sports on an artificial turf field.
- Mowing the lawn is a rite of passage for young men and women (my dad claims it is one of the reasons he had kids).
- Becoming involved with a local school will make every Superintendent a better person and every student a more informed citizen.
- High phosphorus levels in some waters are not caused by educated fertilizer applicators.
- The turf pesticides that we use today are extremely safe when used in the proper manner. Homeowners do not know the proper manner, and it is our responsibility to share our knowledge with them.

- Every Superintendent should be working to make sure that their piece of earth has a positive environmental impact on the rest of the world.
- A world without turfgrass would not be the kind of place where I would like to live.
- All of you should be proud to be turfgrass management professionals.

The truth is, Guru or Schmuck it really doesn’t matter. When confronted by people who have a differing opinion from mine, I state the facts as I know them and express what I believe. Another truth: I really am happy with my career path, and I feel that the world is a better place because of the work that I do and continually try to do. I have been blessed to spend most of my life working with grass. Yeah, that’s it! Grass...think about it. 

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