HOMEOWNER PROBLEMS WITH SOD

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Homeowner problems with sod have changed over the past eight years that I have been working in the Jackson area. My area of responsibility now includes Jackson, Calhoun, Branch and Hillsdale counties. The two major centers of population are Jackson and Battle Creek.

During the first few years, the major homeowner sod problems were lack of fertilization, watering, thatch, and powdery mildew. During the past three to four years, fusarium blight has become the most serious problem. When the disease first began to show up, it was four to five years after establishment. It then progressed to two to three years and now we are finding it one year after establishment, and in a few cases, the same year. Now this last instance, it may well be sod that has been grown in the field for two years. You can drive through some subdivisions and it is very prevalent. Many of the people who have affected lawns have automatic watering systems or take the time to water properly.

As you know, Tersan 1991 is the only material available for homeowner use. There is some very strong reaction when the cost of this program is realized. One homeowner in 1973 applied three 1/2 lb/1000 sq. ft. applications of Tersan 1991 as recommended. The grass recovered in 1973. On his 8000 sq. ft. lawn he spent $150. This did not bother him too much until in 1974 the disease was just as bad as in 1973. If it was only a one-shot deal, it would not be too bad, but as an annual cost, homeowners rebel. Some ask, "What can I overseed with?" Others say, "I would have been better off seeding."

The image given the sod industry is not a good one. This spreads very rapidly by word of mouth when a friend asks the homeowner how the lawn is. I realize the area I serve is a small part of the total market area when one-half of all Michigan sod goes out of state. However, because of the nearness to the producing area, there is also a higher percentage of home lawns sodded.

The problem is affecting our landscapers as the customer blames them for so-called poor sod. There are major landscapers in the area who discourage the use of sod except on slopes. They say, "We have a lot less trouble and more satisfied customers with seeded lawns." As advisors to people on which method to obtain grass, we point out the advantages and disadvantages of both methods. With recent problems with sodded lawns and reactions by owners, you begin to wonder the advisability of sod.

During the summer of 1974, Dr. Bird, MSU Nematologist, and I sampled nine problem lawns. All had stunt nematodes with the Fusarium blight. The sod from fusarium lawns in the area have come from at least five or six different sod farms in the Jackson-Lansing area. One landscaper brought in samples of turf he had just put on a new lawn and stunt nematodes were present in the sample.

One grower indicated to me it was not his problem as long as Fusarium was not showing on the turf. However, the problem affects the whole industry.

At present, the use of Tersan 1991 is the only material registered for homeowner use. Last year the purchase price ran from $10 to $15 per lb. Nemagon 8.6 EC, Nemagon 12.1 EC and Fumazone 86 E are registered for homeowner use by commercial applicators. These are applied by the drench method. However, at present time, few commercial applicators are doing homeowner work. The previously mentioned materials plus Nemacur are registered for use by the sod grower.

The cost of the Nemagon and Fumazone treatments would be considerably less than Tersan 1991 if it can be obtained perhaps under $50 for 1000 sq. yd. of lawn. This would be less objectionable.

However, if sod were sodded on a nematode-free basis, it would be the best for the total industry. How can this be done? Three possibilities are as follows:

1. New Varieties - When Merion Bluegrass began to show susceptability, Fylking was to be more resistant. Now it turns out to be more susceptible to fusarium. There are some new varieties on the market that look promising, but have they been on the market long enough?
2. Crop Rotation - Certain crops could be rotated with sod that reduces the stunt nematode levels in the soil. However, most of the crops are either not suitable to the organic soils or, like onions, potatoes, and lettuce, require a completely different line of machinery, storage and marketing system, and at present prices, they are in worse condition than the sod industry.
3. Fumigation - Costs of materials for the Nemacur, Fumazone and Nemagon treatments would run about $70 per acre. On 4000 sq. yd. to an acre, this would mean a cost of 2¢-2 1/2¢ per sq. yd. Most home lawns are 1000 sq. yd. or under, thus an additional cost of about $25.

From my remarks, I'm recommending the third alternative. The landscaper could fumigate the site, but because of the lot size, he is limited in equipment and it will increase the cost to close to $50 per lot. I believe the increased cost can be passed on to the homeowner because it will be a better buy for him.

In closing, the fusarium blight-stunt nematode relationship is becoming a serious problem and will be even more serious in the future. Now is the time to take action where it costs the least and will have the least effect to the customer in cost and bad feelings at the farm.