

HELP, WHERE CAN I GO TO GET IT?

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In the past ten years as horticultural extension agent in a large, urban county (one million population), I probably have seen every turf problem and faced literally thousands of turf related questions. However, I would be the first person to admit that I didn't always have the answers. But now with over ten years of collective experience, I believe my diagnostic skills and knowledge base have expanded considerably. However, regardless of our training and experience, sooner or later we all need additional help or advice.

Before we consider sources of assistance, let's take a brief look at some important points to remember. Careful attention to these items will insure a successful search for assistance.

1. Take action promptly! The causal agents for most turf problems seldom linger in the turf area. The longer you wait before obtaining a diagnosis the more difficult it becomes to obtain an accurate answer. After all, in a relatively short period of time, injured turf becomes decaying organic matter.
2. Try for a field visit! Due to the highly perishable nature of turf samples, an on-site inspection is usually more productive for everyone involved with the problem. An on-site inspection also allows the "expert" to put together all the pieces of the complex puzzle that can impact on turf quality. For example, problems related to cultural and soil conditions or toxic chemicals are exceedingly difficult to diagnose from small turf samples.
3. Take notes and keep records! As mentioned in item (2.), the turf "expert" must put together pieces of information and observations to diagnose the problem. The more information you can provide, the more accurate the diagnosis will be. Such information as cultural care, previous problems, weather data, and cultivars can be crucial for an accurate diagnosis.
4. Take photographs! Someone once said "a picture is worth a thousand words". Photographs that show both close-ups of the problem plus overall symptom patterns can be an invaluable diagnostic tool. Photographs, notes and observations and a good sample are your next best alternative to an on-site inspection.
5. Prepare a suitable sample! A suitable sample of a turf problem should be at least one foot square, and it should include most of the root zone. The samples should show the symptoms or problem as it is happening. Submitting samples of dead, decaying turf are seldom helpful. A cardboard box lined with plastic is an ideal container for a sample. Be sure the sample is moist, but do not seal the sample in plastic. Lack of light and a "greenhouse" effect will cause the sample to deteriorate rapidly. Try to deliver the sample to the "expert" as soon as possible. Keep in mind that samples do not last very long in the back of trucks or in sun baked cars. If you must mail the sample, check with your post office for the best procedure for rapid delivery.
6. Call ahead! If you want to visit the "expert" or extension agent at his/her office, be sure to call ahead for an appointment. This small

amount of extra effort usually results in a helpful one-to-one discussion about the problem. If you cannot make direct contact when you call, be sure to leave your name, business name, phone number and a short descriptive message. During the busy season at Extension offices, your inquiry can easily become lost in the deluge of homeowner calls if you do not leave a meaningful message.

A wide variety of resources are available to turf industry professionals for problem solving and consultation. In urbanized areas, your local Extension office would be a good place to begin. Usually personnel will be familiar with common turf problems plus be aware of the resources that can be helpful. Samples can also be delivered or mailed to the Plant Diagnostic Lab, Plant Biology Bldg., M.S. U., East Lansing, MI 48824. Turf specialists at M. S. U. can also be contacted, but their time is very limited because they must cover the entire state.

Local suppliers of equipment, fertilizers and pesticides are often the best experts on product selection and use. Often they have years of experience in the turf industry and are very proficient at problem diagnosis. Just as service after the sale is an important consideration when purchasing equipment, it should also be important for other turf care products.

Other professionals within the turf industry can be another source of assistance. Usually this type of friendship is a natural outgrowth of participation in local professional associations. Active association members tend to be keenly concerned about their industry, and as a result, they are willing to help another member in a time of need.

A wide variety of trade magazines are available to turf industry professionals. "Weeds, Trees, and Turf", "Grounds Maintenance", "Lawn Care Industry", and "American Lawn Applicator" are a few on my reference shelves. I believe that these publications provide some of the best, low-cost, in service training available. Just remember to save the indexes so that you can quickly locate specific information. Of course, you should also have a collection of reference books and publications on every facet of turf maintenance.

Finally, don't forget that you should always be striving to develop the best "expert" -- yourself. Take advantage of every educational opportunity and as you gain knowledge and skills, you will become the "expert" to the new people entering the turf industry.