



As branch manager for TruGreen/ChemLawn in the Houston, Texas area, Charlie Fallis faced a season full of customer complaints about brown patch. Once nights begin to cool off in mid-August, the region's predominantly St. Augustinegrass lawns are highly susceptible to rhizoctonia (commonly known as brown patch).

"I'd say a good 80 percent of our customers' yards have brown patch in them each year," notes Fallis. "The disease starts off as small, brown circles with leaves appearing wet or soaked. As it progresses, the circles get to be the size of a plate and then a trash lid, and it can take over the whole yard. The sheath of the leaf dies and you can just pull the dead grass away. It gets pretty ugly."

Since TruGreen/ChemLawn has a free service-call policy, the company lost revenue each fall by having to spot-treat customers' lawns in an attempt to control brown patch. "We used a variety of chemical controls, but we really didn't feel confident we even reduced the disease that much," adds Fallis. "I tried to concentrate on cul-

tural controls, telling customers to control watering, mow at the right height, keep a sharp mower blade and fertilize at optimum levels. But it's hard to get people to follow your advice."

If Jaynes could convince customers to limit watering their lawns in the fall, brown patch occurrence could be reduced dramatically, he says. Cultural controls work hand-in-hand with chemical controls to reduce disease outbreak.

"Brown patch is much worse in our area than farther north," he adds.

One solution

Last year, the Houston branches of TruGreen/ChemLawn used Prostar 50WP fungicide for brown patch control. The company tried the product on a limited basis in 1993 and found that it did a terrific job on brown patch, Fallis says. Used either preventively or curatively, it provided control for 14 to 21 days.

"Prostar is the most effective product we've ever used for brown patch," says Bob Jaynes, TruGreen/ChemLawn field service manager. "I'd say it reduced our callbacks by about 80 percent. [It] works so well that after we treat an area it dries up so effectively that customers are noticing the difference."

Routine lawn care for Houston area TruGreen/ChemLawn customers means seven applications each year. Since preventive disease control costs extra, Fallis and his employees had difficulty selling the service. But now more customers are requesting it.

Other headaches

Other seasonal lawn care challenges in the Houston area include gray leaf spot, Virginia buttonweed and dallisgrass. Though TruGreen/ChemLawn has found effective products to use on the first two problems, there is no registered pesticide to control dallisgrass in St. Augustine turf.

"It's one of those situations where you have to tell your customers they need to pull a few weeds in spite of paying for a lawn service," says Jaynes. "Sometimes they don't like that."

TruGreen/ ChemLawn finds a way to reduce callbacks in Houston