Spring Disease Issues

Our recent wet weather, combined with cool evenings and warm days are ideal conditions for diseases that can affect turf grasses, as well as small grains such as wheat and ryegrass. Many producers who are growing small grains for hay and grain production know the importance of preventive fungicide treatments. But for the typical homeowner, having an understanding of symptoms and proper preventive measures to treat turf disease issues is important, especially right now.

For the common warm and cool season turf grasses we have, such as bermudagrass, St. Augustine, centipede, and tall fescue, there are about fifteen diseases that can be found. These include brown patch, large patch, dollar spot, spring dead spot, gray leaf spot, pythium, fairy ring, and rust. For the foliar diseases, such as patch, dollar spot, and rust, one of the most common symptoms will be circular lesions of various colors on the leaf tissue. There may also be mycelium, or spider-web-like masses of fungal growth that occurs in the turf and thatch. For many of these diseases, problems are first noticed when circular patches start occurring in the turf.

When people learn that they have disease in their turf, the first thought that comes to mind is “What can I spray?” Although there are several fungicide products that are effective against several of these diseases, fungicides are mainly preventive in nature and will only help keep current problems in check. Also, most fungicides only have an effective time-window of one to two weeks. The other important fact to remember is that many of these disease-causing agents are already present in the soil and thatch and only require ideal growing conditions to become problematic. This means that changing of our cultural practices (how we manage our turf) is the best way to prevent and control disease problems. These include: controlled and timely irrigation, proper fertilization, mowing height, thatch removal, resistant varieties, and adequate sunlight.

Over-watering and fertility management are most likely the two most common factors related to disease issues. Lawns should be watered infrequently and thoroughly, rather than a small amount of water every day or two. Ideally, lawns should be irrigated with one inch of water each week if there’s no rainfall. This should be done early in the morning to allow for the leaves to dry during the day. Over and under fertilization of nitrogen can also lead to disease issues. Over fertilization can especially be a problem in St. Augustine grass. A soil test can indicate what levels of fertilization will be required and timing of fertilization (fertilization in middle and late summer can exacerbate disease issues).

If you believe you’re having disease problems in your lawn, diagnosis may be necessary, but management of these practices can help get you back on track. For more information, you can contact the Extension office.