

Excessive Shade on the Lawn

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The lawn grasses that are recommended for South Texas landscapes generally do best when planted in full sun. That is especially true of Bermuda grass and buffalo grass. St Augustine grass can tolerate 30 to 40% shade and zoysia grass about half that much. For Bermuda and buffalo grass that will translate to about 10 hours of direct sunlight reaching the grass blades. For St Augustine that means at least 6 hours of direct sunlight and about 8 hours for zoysia grass. That is sun that actually reaches to grass blades not the sun you can see while standing on the lawn.

In addition to plenty of light, lawns require 6 inches of soil and a reasonable amount of water to prosper. In this column in the past we have discussed challenges to lawn performance including drought, brown patch, take all patch, grubs, and chinch bugs. For more information on those topics seek out my articles and information from others that are available on plantanswers.com.

Excessive shade is a condition that usually develops as the years pass and the shade trees in the lawn become larger and more dense. Based on the questions that we are getting on the Gardening South Texas Radio Show; shade is becoming more and more of a problem. Quite often it complicates or contributes to other lawn issues.

There are several conditions and symptoms that reveal if you have excessive shade for a well-performing lawn.

1. The lawn becomes less and less dense. There is more space between each blade of grass. This phenomenon often motivates homeowners to add more fertilizer to the lawn. When the fertilizer does not work, a fungicide is applied to see if the browning is being caused by a fungus. In fact, brown patch is likely to attack a lawn in excessive shade especially if extra water is added to try and address the thinning lawn and the water accumulates in low spots or behind edging.
2. During dry periods a lawn trying to prosper with excessive shade will be more sensitive to drought. It must compete with the tree feeder roots and is starting at a disadvantage because it is weak from the excessive shade. This situation isn't always easy to detect if there is plenty of moisture. At that point where the lawn is receiving 30-40% shade the lawn in the shade may stay green longer than the portion of the lawn in more sun as the weather dries out. It may make you think that if the whole lawn had 30% shade it would stay green with less water. In fact, that is probably true, but the trick is to keep the shade level at 30%.
3. Weeds become more prevalent because the lawn is less dense and the fact that there are weeds like horseherb that can tolerate more shade than lawn grasses. The weeds are better able to take advantage of the fertilizer mentioned in condition #1 than the shade stressed lawn grass.

Dealing with excessive shade.

1. Sometimes you can get partial or temporary relief by thinning out the crowns of the shade trees. but don't expect a permanent solution unless you cut trees down. I don't recommend that trees are cut down to improve the lawn. In our climate shade is more important than a perfect lawn!

2. Tolerate a thin lawn that is less capable of dealing with drought, insects, and diseases. If you are content with a shaded area with some grass and mowable weeds like horseherb the area could evolve to be easy to manage, relatively attractive and water efficient.
3. Gradually convert the lawn to shade tolerant groundcovers such as Asiatic jasmine, mondo grass, lirioppe, sedges, and dwarf ruellia. Layered groundcovers of different textures and sizes interspersed with paths and patios can be very attractive. Groundcovers require less maintenance and water than lawn grass.