Gardening Question and Answer

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Q. Is there any way to remove patches of Bermuda grass from a zoysia lawn? How about from St Augustine grass? All the herbicides seem to kill all of the grasses or none of the grasses!

A. If you have a wick applicator you can touch the Bermuda clumps with the wick. That works best in zoysia grass because the Bermuda will grow faster and over the zoysia. Some of the zoysia will be killed but not much if you are careful. The zoysia will slowly move in from the side to fill the gap.

For the St Augustine lawn, the best strategy seems to be to mow the St Augustine high and keep it well watered. The Bermuda will be there but not easily seen.

Bermuda invades these grasses when the soil is compacted from traffic, and/or the lawns have dried out. Both St Augustine and zoysia require more water than Bermuda grass. Aerate the lawn to reduce compaction.

Q. What are some shrubs we can plant in shade? Are any of them deer proof?

A. Viburnums, nandina, pittosporum, hollies, and primrose jasmine all perform well in the shade. The viburnums and primrose jasmine seem to be deer proof in all situations. Nandinas and pittosporum do escape deer browsing in some locations and neighborhoods. In my neighborhood the deer eat burford holly but not dwarf Chinese or yaupon hollies.

Q. Is it a problem with the birds if we stop feeding sunflower seeds and mixed grain now that summer has arrived and the plants are producing seeds? Our exterminator says that if we quit feeding for a period, our rodent population will probably fall.

A. The summer break is a common strategy in bird feeding circles. You will not observe as many birds as you do when you are feeding them, but the break does not seem to hurt bird populations. Some gardeners switch to a feeding tactic where only enough seed is provided each morning for the birds to consume it by noon. Rodents do most of their feeding at night. Continue to provide sugar water to the hummingbirds. As far as I know it does not attract rodents.

Q. We are holding our breath. We got serious this year and followed your advice closely in selecting, planting and caring for our tomatoes. We are already harvesting BHN 968 cherry tomatoes and the Tycoon, Solar Fire, Celebrity and Red Deuce plants are loaded with tennis ball size fruit. We reapplied 19-5-9 slow release lawn fertilizer as per the recommendation. We are nervous about the birds. Mockingbirds and woodpeckers are hanging around the fruit and we noticed that they started eating some of the ripe cherry tomatoes. What should we do to protect the tomatoes?

A. Birds can be an issue. I generally plant more tomatoes than we need and reluctantly “share” with the birds. You can try the plastic snake or owl decoys. They sometimes work for a while. There are also bird cover fabrics that work pretty well. Check with your favorite nursery. To reduce the share of the tomatoes that the birds take, it also works to pick the full-size fruit just as soon as it turns from dark green to a light green or early orange. The tomatoes will quickly ripen the rest of the way on your kitchen counter. Good Luck!