Burning Your Lawn

The weather has been crazy this season! I have daylilies that think it is springtime starting to sprout and a lilac bush that does not believe that winter has arrived still full of lush green foliage. But there is one thing, regardless of the weather outside that seems to happen at this time every year... people are burning their lawns! I sometimes wonder if it is based on ideas handed down, or passed around, or if it is just a notion to burn something and escape the winter monotony. So this week we are going to take a deeper look at why it has been done in the past, and should you burn your lawn in the future?

Prescribed fires have been used for decades to reduce organic matter in the forest, hayfield, or lawn. Out west, we have seen devastation and destruction, where the natural cycle of fire has been tampered with by humans. But why would someone set fire to their hayfield? Most hayfields in this area are actually bermudagrass. Throughout the season, organic matter builds up above the soil surface. We call this thatch. Thatch can harbor insects and diseases, and it holds on to vital nutrients that the bermudagrass could benefit from.

Setting a prescribed fire to a bermudagrass pasture or hayfield during the dormant season can accomplish quite a few things. The fire burns off the thatch layer that is harboring insects like the spittlebug. It reduces the amount of overwintering spores from diseases like leafspot. Burning leaves the first hay cutting particularly clean (free of weeds) for those specialty buyers. The blackened field will absorb heat from the sun and increase soil temperatures faster. Last but not least, burning bermudagrass pastures or hayfields releases the nutrients that were bound up in the thatch layer and makes them available to the plant. Many growers with bermudagrass fields continue to use burning as a part of their management practices, while even more have turned to new technology to achieve the same if not better results.

So, with all that said, why are people burning their centipedegrass lawns? The only answer I can give you is what I like to call the “Neighbor Effect.” Last week, Mr. Smith saw Mr. Brown burning his centipedegrass lawn. This week, Mr. Smith decided that if Mr. Brown is doing it, so should he!
CENTIPEDEGRASS SHOULD NEVER BE BURNED! Did everyone read that? Centipedegrass should never be burned! First off, if your homeowner’s insurance agent caught wind of you burning your lawn, I am pretty sure you would be shopping for new insurance. Secondly, you are putting yourself and those around you at risk. Yes, the weather has been unseasonably nice the last few weeks, but what about the wind and a lack of rain. This weather is prime for fires to get out of hand. Last year a man in Hoke County collapsed and died while trying to burn his lawn. Last, but most importantly, centipedegrass does not do well when burned, and burning can severely injure the grass. The weather this season makes burning even more detrimental to centipedegrass as some lawns may not have achieved full dormancy yet.

Most people select centipedegrass for their lawns because it is low maintenance and well suited to this area. As the weather gets warm and centipede comes out of dormancy, leave your lawn alone. My advice to all of you who are ready to burn, lime, fertilize, and herbicide it to death, is to stop before you have nothing left but a sandy plot of land. Centipedegrass is sensitive to herbicides, it does not like heavy fertilization, enjoys the low pH that is typical to our area, and as you just read, burning can actually injure the grass.

So get outside, enjoy the weather while it is here, but please leave the centipedegrass alone until May! If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, at (910) 671-3276 or by E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu or visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center’s website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.