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Campbell Vaughn: Try these tips to keep centipede lawns looking healthy

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We have a lot of folks around town that have good old-fashion centipede lawns. And if you do centipede the right way, it is about as low of maintenance of a grass as you can find.

But there are some thing you need to make sure happen to have a nice healthy centipede lawn.

Centipede can be easy to establish by sodding, seeding or if you are ambitious, sprigging. But you do need to know a few things to make sure you get the most out of it.

Centipede grass spreads by stolons which are what we commonly refer to as runners. Essentially the grass runs across the top of the ground and roots down into the soil as it creeps. This is a good thing if you need your grass to spread, but it means centipede is not a very deep-rooted grass.

When the roots don't go deep, issues can occur.

Centipede is fairly drought tolerant, but like any plant, the deeper the root system the better the health of the plant. Frequent watering promotes shallow roots. Deep and less frequent water promotes deeper roots. I am going to rent a billboard to promote that statement.

Excessive thatch can lead to poor root systems as well. Essentially the roots will try and attach to the organic dead grass clippings and not into the soil which is not ideal. Soil is where we they need roots. Keep thatch out and core aerate if the soil gets compacted.

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Centipede needs full sun to thrive, does not mind a little lower pH and only needs a pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet of turf per season. Granny Smith apple green is the color you need in centipede. Excessive nitrogen will make it look nice and dark green for a season, but it will look dead as dirt the following years.

Use 15-0-15 with iron in mid-May at a rate of 5 pounds per 1,000 square feet and that should do it for the year. Mowing heights should be about 1.5 to 2 inches and maybe a notch higher in the late summer.

Weed control is a little different for centipede. Avoid using traditional preemergence on centipede turf. Most preemergence products work as a root growth inhibitor (annual seed germinates and preemergence stunts the root from forming and the seed dies). With the root system centipede has, it can stunt root growth leading to long-term decline in the overall health of the lawn.

Use products like atrazine in late December and again in June for weed control. Image Kills Nutsedge is another good product to get some other weeds the atrazine might miss. Another product that only works on centipede grass but not other traditional warm season turfgrass is sethoxydim (Hi-Yield Grass Killer). Sethoxydim is a type of grass killer that will remove crabgrass, goosegrass, Johnsongrass and Bermuda that might creep into your centipede lawn.

Another couple of centipede turf problems to keep in mind is winter dieback and some fungal issues. Smaller root systems can mean less stout of a plant and when we get a heavy freeze, the cold can kill parts of the lawn. If you see some round yellowing circles in the lawn it might be Large Patch fungus. Treat it with Scott's Disease EX especially in the fall.