

# Try 'Brown' Dormant Grass For The Winter

New residents to southeastern North Carolina often have a difficult time with dormant lawns.

For example, brown dormant grass drives a friend of mine crazy. He spends half the summer trying to salvage his bermudagrass and all winter trying to grow perfect ryegrass. His descriptions of his lawn care program sound like titles from "crisis management" seminars. If you are tired of fighting year around mowing, fertilizing and pest control, then consider the other alternative: brown grass!

The predominant warm-season lawngresses in the Cape Fear region are centipede, bermuda, zoysia, carpet, bahia and St. Augustinegrasses. During the growing season these grasses look, behave and grow differently. However, once cool weather arrives all initiate dormancy when day length decreases and the average soil and air temperatures dip below 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Warm-season grasses then turn brown and will be inactive until the following spring (except during temporary warm spells).

Dormant warm-season grasses appear to be dormant but underground, the root and stem tissue continues to function. Starches in the above-ground stems (stolons) and underground stems (rhizomes) are constantly being converted to sugars for cell respiration and other metabolic processes. Root growth dramatically slows but does not stop. Roots are absorbing water from the soil and stems continue to lose water to the atmosphere even though the leaves are no longer green.

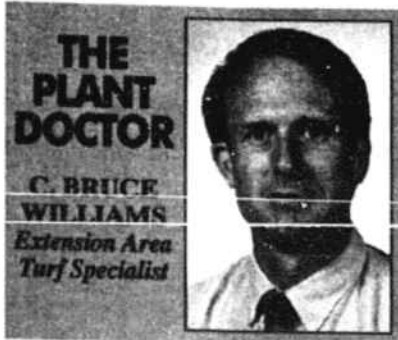
Winter kill is often most severe when the soil becomes frozen and the air temperature is warm. The water lost by the stem is not replaced by the roots because the ground is frozen. The stem dries out and dies.

Research at several major universities has demonstrated that some management practices during the fall of the year improve the ability of a warm-season grass to survive the winter. Weak, diseased, drought-stressed, over-fertilized or nutrient-starved grass is more prone to winter kill than healthy grass.

### Steps To Winterize Your Warm-Season Lawngress

1. **Soil test.** Home lawns should have the soil tested every two years. Potassium, iron, magnesium and calcium are critical to a healthy grass plant. Inadequate amounts of these and other elements in the soil can increase winter kill.

Soil reaction that is too acid or



too alkaline will not allow the plant roots to chemically extract nutrients

from the soil. Apply the limestone recommended by the soil test during winter dormancy. Apply other needed nutrients during the next growing season.

2. **Use the correct height of cut for your grass species.** Studies in Alabama found that centipede grass routinely cut at heights greater than 1.5 inches was more prone to winter kill than centipede grass cut at 1 inch.

3. **Consider using a high-potassium fertilizer in late September or early October.** Research has

demonstrated that good potassium nutrition reduces winter kill in warm-season grasses. The application of 4 to 5 pounds per 1,000 square feet of one of the following fertilizers 5-10-30, 5-5-25, 0-0-22 or 3-9-27 will reduce winter injury in warm season grasses.

4. **Do not use a high-nitrogen fertilizer in the fall!** High-nitrogen fertilization in the autumn will increase winter kill in most all warm-season grasses. Increased environmental pollution is caused from heavy fall fertilization.

5. **The use of chelated iron** or similar iron-containing product when grass begins to lose color will help your lawn stay greener longer and green-up sooner next spring.

6. **Do not burn your dormant lawn.** This is a fire hazard and your grass will derive very little if any agronomic benefit from burning.

7. **Plan on treating your dormant warm-season lawn with a herbicide in December.** Low rates of the herbicides atrazine or simazine labeled for home lawns applied in late November or early December

will kill most germinating weed seeds and young plants without harming the dormant warm-season grass. This practice will greatly reduce herbicide use in the spring of the year and contribute to a quicker, thicker stand of grass the following growing season.

8. **Do not overseed.** Overseeding is stressful to all warm-season grasses. If you must overseed, read last week's column.

Send your gardening questions and comments to the Plant Doctor, P.O. Box 109, Bolivia NC 28422.

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