

# Should I remove tree and start over?

## ORGANIC ANSWERS



HOWARD GARRETT  
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I planted a bur oak about five years ago. The problem is that the root ball still moves when I apply pressure to the tree trunk. I am afraid that when I planted it from its container it had girdling roots that have not grown outward. I am considering removing the tree because I do not want it falling on my house 10 years from now.

M.R., Fort Worth

If the tree hasn't rooted well by now, it never will. It's probably best to start over with a better specimen planted properly.

Circling and girdling roots in container-grown trees are a major problem. Try to buy balled and burlapped trees, or knock or wash the soil off the container-grown tree's roots and plant it bare-root so that you can see what you are dealing with.

I have put several thousand earthworms into my garden and flower beds. The worms were producing well in late winter, and I kept them warm and fed. Lately, I have blended grapefruit rinds and other things (mostly citrus) to feed



FILE/Staff

Earthworms cannot live on citrus alone. Try feeding them some shredded paper, as well.

them. The worms no longer seem to be growing and are not producing well. Am I feeding the wrong things?

B.R., Dallas

Cut back on the citrus and add molasses. I like citrus, but making it the dominant food source could be hard on the worms. Adding shredded paper also will help.

Boys climbed our young magnolia tree and snapped off quite a few branches on one side. Several other branches were nearly snapped off. Other than attempting to offer support to the injured branches by taping them with floral tape, is there anything we should do?

C.S., Plano

Broken limbs can't be mended. Plant tissue doesn't heal the way animal tissue does. Plants

encapsulate or grow around an injury, which often results in poor growth and a weak or rotted place inside the wounded limb. It's best to remove broken and damaged limbs, keep the tree healthy and let it fill out to cover the open area.

I have several garlic plants in my vegetable garden that have sprouted long, green tubes from the tops of the plants. On top of each tube is a large blossom composed of several small blossoms that appear to contain seeds. When should the seeds be harvested? How should they be stored? When should they be planted?

R.G., Fort Worth

The garlic top is called a scape or garlic flower, and this is where bulbils will form. For the bulbils to become viable for planting, they must be left on the plant until they mature and the leaves start turning brown.

They can be stored in a cool, dry place for fall planting, or they can be planted in organic potting soil immediately after harvest. Fall planting is best.

### RESOURCES

**ONLINE:** www.dirtdoctor.com for free organic-program handouts

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## CHORES

# Brown spots in lawn? Look to Lassie

By RICK ROSEN  
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Brown rings of dead grass in your backyard could be a lawn disease. Or there could be another culprit: your dog.

Dog urine can burn the lawn, leaving ugly dead spots.

What can you do, then, other than chase after your pet with a water hose?

Luckily, there is an easy fix for all but the severe burns: Do nothing. "There should be no reason to replant these areas of the lawn," says Dr. Jim McAfee, Texas Cooperative Extension turf-grass specialist. "With our warm-season turf grasses, they should grow and fill in these burn spots."

To identify a dog spot, look for small brown spots ringed by dark green grass. The high amounts of nitrogen in urine burn the lawn. The edge of the ring is green because the urine becomes diluted there, and the nitrogen actually acts as a fertilizer.

The biggest problem is when dogs continually use the same spot in the yard. That will eventually kill the grass.

Female dogs are more likely than males to create the burn rings, because they squat to urinate. (Some horticulturists even call the problem female dog spot disease.) Young male dogs also squat but usually grow out of the habit. And dogs are a bigger problem than cats because cats don't squat over the lawn as dogs do.

Watering the area immediately after the dog does its business will help prevent the burn, Dr. McAfee and other experts say.

Some studies have shown that watering no more than eight hours after the deed did help somewhat to prevent burning.

You can apparently forget repellents. *Consumer Reports* magazine, in its May issue, interviewed experts who said animal repellents are of little or no use.

Some home remedies include giving your dog tomato juice, vinegar or baking soda. However, veterinarians warn that additives could affect the urinary tract and organs.

The same goes for adding salt to your dog's diet to make her drink more water, thus diluting the urine. Always consult a vet before trying an additive.

If the grass is badly damaged, it may be best to replant. Small spots will eventually grow back. If the spots are larger, you can cut out the dead spot in the ring and plant plugs, which are pieces of grass cut from a strip of sod. Most lawns here are either Bermuda grass or St. Augustine; your local nursery can tell you what you have.

In spring or fall, you can scratch or dig up the dead grass and spread grass seed over the area mixed into the soil. Be sure to keep the area moist until the grass sprouts and grows.

### AT A GLANCE

Here are a few ideas for preventing dog spots on your lawn and what to do if they appear:

- A motion-activated sprinkler, primarily designed to keep cats and rabbits out of gardens, may be the ticket if stray or neighborhood dogs use your yard. It would be tough on your pet, however.
- Water the area soon after the dog has urinated. In other words, follow your pet around with a garden hose or a watering can.
- Switch to an organic lawn. Adding the nitrogen from a dog's urine to a lawn that has been fertilized with high-nitrogen chemical fertilizers is more than some lawns can handle.
- Walk the dog to a park or field to relieve itself.
- Train your pet to eliminate in a designated area of the yard. Put in gravel or mulch, along with amenities such as sculpture or a fake fire hydrant.
- Paul Tukey, author of *The Organic Lawn Care Manual*, says a dietary supplement made from *Yucca schidigera*, or Mojave yucca, has shown some success. He says that it makes the urine less toxic to lawns.
- Plant something other than grass.

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