

# Getting to the root of thatch

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It would be great if the lawn felt like a soft feather bed when we walked on it. But would that indicate a healthy lawn? Well, no. A healthy lawn should feel springy. But a lawn that is soft enough to sleep on can indicate a too-thick layer of thatch. And that can mean serious problems for your turf.

What is thatch? According to the Texas A&M turf specialists, "Thatch is the intermingled layers of living and dead stems, roots, rhizomes and stolons that form between the live green vegetation of your lawn and the soil surface." Hybrid Bermuda grass and St. Augustine, commonly used here, develop thatch. (Common Bermuda, though, does not, notes Dr. James McAfee, a turfgrass expert with A&M.)

Some thatch — between one-quarter- and one-half-inch thickness, says A&M — is good. It shades the crowns of the grass plants, conserves moisture and provides nutrients. But too much can, Texas A&M says, "reduce water, nutrient and air infiltration into the soil (which leads to reduced rooting and decreased drought-resistance) and increased disease and insect damage."

By the way, leaving grass clippings on the lawn after mowing doesn't cause thatch, experts say. Clippings easily decompose and don't build up an unwanted layer of residue.

## Thatch busters

How do you know if your lawn needs dethatching? Trey Rogers, author of *Lawn Geek: Tips and Tricks for the Ultimate Turf From the Guru of Grass* (New American Library, \$15 paperback), writes that there is a surefire way to know. Dig up a piece of turf with a sharp tool. (Get a section that goes through the thatch and into the soil beneath.) Take out your ruler. "If the dead-grass layer is more than a half-inch, you need to dethatch or aerate. It's as simple as that," he writes.

To cure your thatch problem, start by mowing (best time to do this is in early spring). And, unlike other times you mow, cut low and remove the clippings.

Then, you'll need some power tools. There are several that will rid you of thatch.

## CHORES

A core aerator will punch holes through the thatch, allowing beneficial microorganisms to break it down. (You'll still need to rake up the cores and the thatch layer; compost them.)

## Rake it up

If your lawn is small and the thatch layer isn't too thick, you might get by with a stiff, metal lawn rake. However, that is very slow; a power rake is much more efficient. It still can take a few hours, depending on the size of your lawn.

Another valuable tool is a vertical mower. The lawn-mower-size device punches through the thatch quickly. Mow two or three passes for best results.

You can rent aerators, power rakes and vertical mowers, though you'll need to look around. We found aerators at Home Depot and at NationsRent in Mesquite; the NationsRent stores in Plano also carried power rakes.

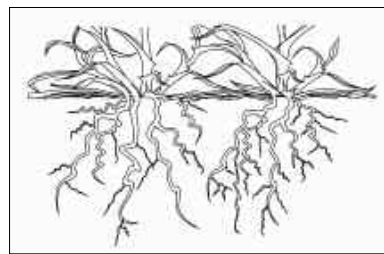
Liquid dethatchers, which are recommended in some organic-lawn programs, don't have the proven track record of the mechanical options. "Various other products on the market claim to control thatch through the addition of bacteria or enzymes to the soil," according to the Texas A&M Turfgrass Web site. "These products have not been proven through research and cannot be recommended."

## Prevention is best

Once your thatch is gone, how do you prevent it from returning? Dr. McAfee says that if homeowners didn't overwater and overfertilize, they wouldn't get thatch. Maintenance practices are vital. Fertilize properly, using the right amount and no more; don't overdo the pesticides; water infrequently and deeply instead of shallowly and often; mow often; top-dress turf with a thin layer of soil; aerate your soil.

The specialists at A&M have more tips and specific steps for proper fertilization and watering and other good turf practices (<http://aggieturf.tamu.edu/answers4you/index.htm>).

## TAKE A TURF SAMPLE



In healthy turf, grass roots extend below the surface, and the thatch layer is less than 1/2 inch.



Unhealthy turf has stumpy roots that are trying to grow in compacted soil. The thatch layer is larger than 1/2 inch.

SOURCE: Illustrations from *Lawn Geek*

# Keeping those suckers down

How can I keep trees and bushes from having suckers come up around their base? Is there any solution other than cutting the suckers every few weeks?

M.J., Dallas

Plants that sucker badly from the base are either genetically prone to do so or have been planted too deep.

You can fix the second problem by removing excess mulch and soil from around the root flares of trees and shrubs. (See Resources to obtain instructions.)

I plan to build a house, and I have concerns about insects: spiders, carpenter ants, scorpions, termites, etc. I use a Sentricon bait system at my current house. I had planned to have the foundation and studs at the new house treated by the builder with a standard method he uses on all custom homes. What is your opinion?

J.J., Dallas

Baiting systems are better than

## ORGANIC ANSWERS



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spraying or drenching toxic chemicals into the soil.

However, I prefer treating exposed wood with borate products such as Tim-Bor or Bora-Care, dusting diatomaceous earth into wall cavities and treating the soil around the house with beneficial nematodes.

Can the microbes in compost tea be made to go dormant during storage as a seller of compost tea claims? I have contracted with a compost tea producer for a year's worth of the product. However,

conversations with several people at a recent agricultural event produced a full range of responses to my question, from absolutely not to possibly yes to yes.

S.H., Lindale

Compost tea that will stimulate microbes in the soil after application definitely has a shelf life.

But that doesn't mean that there are live microbes in the tea.

Aerated compost tea that is loaded with beneficial fungal life will not stay in that condition very long after the air pump is turned off, much less for weeks in bottles.

## RESOURCES

ONLINE: [www.dirtdoctor.com](http://www.dirtdoctor.com) for free organic-program handouts

RADIO: KSKY-AM (660), Saturday 11 a.m.-noon and Sunday 8-11 a.m. [www.ksky.com](http://www.ksky.com)

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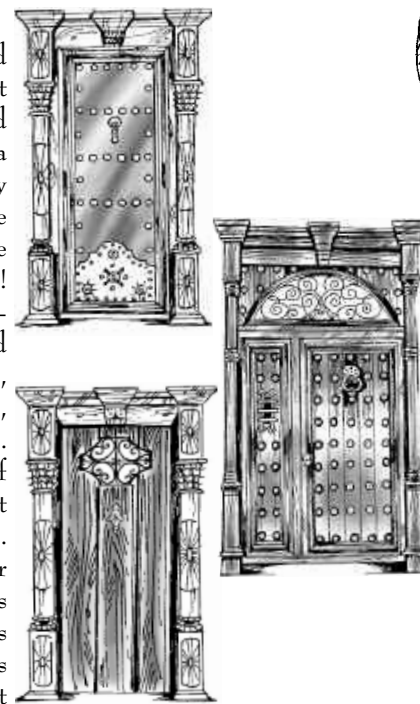
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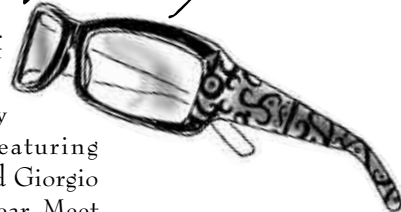


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