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ORGANIC ANSWERS

HOWARD GARRETT

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Question: I need some grass advice regarding the house we bought.

It has 10 trees on the property, mostly live oaks, and the lawn really struggles to get sunlight. When we moved in this past winter, the previous owners had planted winter rye and it was great during early spring. But now our lawn is really struggling.

The backyard, planted with Bermuda, is mostly dirt. The front yard, which gets better sunlight and circulation, has some St. Augustine, but it also has not filled in very well.

I am having the trees trimmed in the next few weeks to allow more sunlight. We don't have a sprinkler system, so watering will be by hand and rain. What type of grass would you suggest I plant that will be shade- and heat-tolerant?

Also, one of the live oaks in the backyard has sprouted up hundreds of suckers on the ground around it, anything I can do to get rid of these?

C.T., Dallas

Answer: The truth about growing grass in the shade is this: You can't.

Trees want full sun and grasses want full sun. Trees win. Thinning the trees helps a little, for a while, but not long term; foliage grows back. Removing trees will work, but that's usually not the best thing to do.

My main recommendation for shady property is to use native mulches and shade-loving ground covers, ferns and shrubs. Grass options for shady areas include planting cool-season grasses like fescue, and now is the time to apply the seeds. These grasses usually burn out in the summer and have to be replanted the next fall, every year.

The other option is to plant St. Augustine sod. It is the most shade-tolerant, but it needs at least half a day of full sun for good results. It can be spot-sodded in bare areas around the grass that's still alive. Grass needs little soil preparation other than to loosen it if compacted.

After planting, this is the best time of the year to apply a half-inch of compost over the new grass and the rest of the yard and beds. Also, applying an organic fertilizer at 20 pounds per 1,000 square feet will help.

I'm experimenting with 'El Toro' zoysia in a partly shaded area in our backyard. Zoysia must be planted as solid sod because it is so slow to spread. It is also the grass that has the least tolerance to wear. Once damaged, it has to be replanted because it won't spread and repair itself.

I wish I had better news for your grass growing, but shady gardens can be quite attractive. That's basically what I have.

Nothing can be done about the live oak root suckers. That is just a genetic quirk. Just keep cutting them back. When trees are healthy, the problem seems to diminish.