

Janet Macunovich's Growing Concerns:

Answers to your gardening questions

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Tip of the week:

Spring is when we **notice lawns gone bad**. We often blame grubs but most of the time a practiced eye identifies other, more debilitating problems such as **chronically dry** soil and roots dying in ground that's packed down and **needs aeration**.

Even if **grubs** were involved in decimating your lawn, they **should not be your focus** in spring. Now, the smartest fix is to rake, seed, water and feed that lawn. Address insect problems later, and only if a careful check during lawn insect season -- summer! -- proves they're doing significant harm.

Spring's time to seed lawns not kill grubs

I bought a house last fall and the **lawn is a wreck**. **Skunks** tore the living daylight out of it all fall. Now there are big bare patches. I guess the skunks might have been hunting grubs and either the grubs or the digging killed the grass.

I want to do something to fix the lawn but I don't know what that is. I'm currently receiving two or three flyers from lawn care companies every week so I could call almost any of them. If I ask them to handle this for me, though, I want to know if what they might propose to do is really the best thing.

Please **tell me about the process of reclaiming a lawn** from skunks, or grubs, and then I'll feel more confident when I call a lawn service for help. - T.K. -

Dear T.K.,

Grubs and skunks may have been involved but neither one should be your focus now. The smartest move is to **rake, seed, water and feed that lawn this spring**, then deal with insect problems later this summer if they recur.

This will contradict what you may be hearing on radio and TV ads. Ads pushing grub killers sprout like weeds as spring approaches, but every greenskeeper and lawn professor knows that **spring is not grub killing time**.*



A European chafer grub. Photo ©2008 Steven Nikkila

Grubs are larvae -- immature beetles. They are to beetles what caterpillars are to butterflies. The two kinds most often involved in lawn damage are **Japanese beetles and European chafers**. Both species hatch from eggs in the soil, eat grass roots from mid- or late summer until late fall, then dig down to be below frozen soil during winter. Now as the soil warms they're squirming their way back up to eat roots for a little while longer, then rest from sometime in April until sometime in June while they transform themselves into adults. The adults emerge in summer, mate and lay eggs to begin another round.

Lawns that are thick and well watered can support a lot of grubs without dying out. Unless the average is more than three grubs per sample** when you flip over a dozen 6" x 6" patches of lawn around the edge of a suspect area, you're wasting money to apply insecticide. The real problem is something else. **Watering does more good, and aerating.**

If your new home sat empty for a spell last year, **drought may be the real culprit**. Lack of water during summer heat can kill a lawn or weaken it so minor problems become killers.

Skunks actually do us a good turn when they go hunting. Meticulous creatures, they're thorough in cleaning up grub gangs. They don't miss much and can devastate a grub colony. Even better, as they hunt they aerate -- which the grubs were doing, too. I normally

list steps in reseeding a lawn as aerate, rake, seed, rake, but you can skip the aerating.

The **time to beat grubs**, if they are the problem with your lawn, **is in July or August**. Check then to see if their population is high enough to warrant control -- remember they're considerably smaller in July than what you might see now in spring. If control is necessary, act then, before they've done their damage and while they are very young and easy to poison.

Spring grub control wastes time and money.

Grubs are tough customers by spring, able to absorb a heavy dose of toxins*** without dying. In addition, their appetites are taking a seasonal downturn. That's bad news when you consider that all the poisons we have for them are compounds that must be ingested -- soaked up by roots that the grubs then eat. (Which is why watering well after applying a grub killer is critical to its effectiveness.)

So look for a lawn service person who knows enough to say "What you need from us is to **rake out the dead areas and spread high quality grass seed**." Sometimes a bit of humus rich soil is called for, to topdress bare areas before seeding but most of the time that's unnecessary. A second light raking after sowing seed presses the seed to the soil.

A **mulch is not necessary over grass seed during cool weather** but you might choose to use a seed ready-mixed with moisture-conserving mulch. If you do, buy extra seed and sow that first, then cover with the hydro mix. Work the mix between your palms as you spread it, to break all clumps into tiny pieces.

Then the hard work starts. You probably can't hire it done as it involves daily checks. It is: To **keep the seeded soil moist but not soggy** until the seed sprouts. You might see a green haze over the seeded patches in a week but if the weather stays very cool it may take longer.

*Copy these URLs to your browser bar to learn more:

*www.ces.purdue.edu/GardenTIPS/insects/grubgoahead.html

**www.uri.edu/ce/factsheets/sheets/whitegrub.html

***http://turf.msu.edu/grubs_spring.htm

Definition of a weed: Groundcover that's embraced its dark side

Janet, **how do you remove a problem groundcover from a mixed border**, where it's mixed itself in with all the perennials and around the bases of trees and shrubs? - S -

Dear S,
If it's a groundcover that travels by running root -- snow on the mountain (*Aegopodium podagraria variegata*), lily of the valley, *Houttuynia cordata*, Canada anemone, etc. -- and it's well established in a bed full of other plants' roots, I can't be sure to eliminate it all in one dig-over. So I don't remove the offender. I **remove the other herbaceous plants, then smother to kill** all the low plants that remain in that area.

If there are trees and shrubs, they stay but I spread a smothering layer of newspaper and mulch within inches of each trunk. Then, **for a whole growing season** -- longer, in the case of something very persistent like *Houttuynia* -- I **keep that bed bare**. I patrol it every week to nip any unwanted shoot that breaks through the cover. This involves peering under shrubs and reaching way in to pluck out what would otherwise linger, gather strength and sally forth to reclaim the bed.

The bed's rightful occupants spend this time **in a holding bed**. I clean their root balls thoroughly before I plant them in their temporary home, even going so far as to divide each clump into many pieces, right down to bare root. It's the only way to **be certain no roots of the offending groundcover sneak in** with the refugees. Perhaps the only thing worse than having one of your groundcovers go bad is realizing that you've introduced it to another bed.

This may sound extreme but I've found it to be the most certain approach, and requires less total time and energy than any other way. If I do a dig-over to roust an offender but leave the bed populated with low plants, I

Love and hate these groundcovers!

The name says it all -- groundcovers spread to cover the ground, excluding other plants.

So perhaps we shouldn't feel sorry for the gardener who plants a groundcover and then cries, "**But it's taking over!**"

Here are some groundcovers that con us into taking them home because we saw them in exceptionally fine form somewhere. Or they disguised themselves at the garden center among the "ornamental perennials." If you see it listed here and keep it anyway, don't cry to me later when it shows its true colors:

- **Bishop's weed** or snow on the mountain (*Aegopodium podagraria variegata*). Its white edged leaves are so attractive, and it grows in shade, so you bring it home. It may spread gradually at first, but then it reverts to its all-green form and explodes in every direction.
- **English ivy** (*Hedera helix*). It's evergreen, grows in shade, reminds us of ancient gardens we'd love to own, and when it first begins to climb a wall, makes us feel like we've joined the Ivy League. Later, when it's grown over the tops of shrubs, entered the house by slipping under the aluminum siding and emerging through an inside wall electric outlet, you realize your folly.
- **Japanese honeysuckle** (*Lonicera japonica* 'Halliana'). We buy it to romp down that steep bank and keep erosion in check, all the while filling our noses with sweet scent. Later, trying to pluck windblown litter from or trim its tangle of branches we realize it's very stingy with its blooms!
- **Lily of the valley** (*Convallaria majalis*). The scent of the flowers takes you back to your childhood and collecting a posy for Mom. So you buy a plant, bring it home, and lose the garden to its mat of roots.
- **Wintercreeper**, woodbine or evergreen euonymus (*Euonymus fortunei* varieties). Has all the bad features of English ivy plus the annoying traits of harboring white scale worse than any dandruff and being unable to lie flat. Even in the open it mounds up on itself as if having a perpetual bad hair day.

condemn myself to at least one season of crawling through that bed lifting the skirt of every remaining desirable plant to ferret out insurgents. By clearing the bed and making it simple to recognize a weed -- anything green! -- I give myself a thoroughly clean area to replant.

As a plus, while the area is bare, **new planting schemes occur to me**. Replanting time becomes **an opportunity to try brand new plants** and find other homes for those which have bided their time in the holding area.

Quick, easy new flower bed

Hello Janet,
I was reading your Issue 742 Thumb's Down **about smothering the grass to make a new garden** -- how you smother in fall or early spring to plant the next fall. I couldn't help letting you know in my garden business, Liberty Street Gardens, we have smothered successfully the same day as planting.

We **dig holes for the shrubs**, and maybe strip a little sod for the perennials, but it depends on consistency of the turf, then **put newspaper down** between the shrubs to **kill the leftover grass**. You need a few extra sheets in the spring, when the grass is really trying to grow, as opposed to the fall, as it's going dormant. Then **cover it all with a few inches of mulch**.

I am pretty sure that another professional gardener told me about this method at an Association of Professional Gardeners meeting, a few years ago. It makes the whole thing even easier if you don't have to wait until the grass is dead. - H.C. -

Hello H.C., **I wrote**: Green thumbs down to digging and lifting any more than you must. For instance, rather than dig out sod where there is heavy clay, smother to kill it. Spread newspaper 4 or 5 sheets thick, and cover it with 4 inches of mulch. My rule when smothering in fall or early spring is '**smother by May 1 to plant the next fall**.'

Smother lawn and plant that day?

Yes you can -- but please **read these precautionary statements first!** If you **answer "yes" to any of these questions, better to wait** through one growing season rather than trying same-day smothering.

- Do deeper rooted, longer-reaching and more **persistent weeds underlay that sod?** Plants such as bindweed, thistle, or scouring rush (horsetail) use energy stored in their thick roots to grow in complete darkness under paper, reach out several feet and burst into newly planted openings, ready to reconquer the bed.
- **Will you be planting very closely?** Think twice if there will be only inches between openings in the smothering paper, rather than feet. Sod that has only narrow strips of newspaper covering it can shift blades right or left, poke foliage up to the sun, and recover to become a garden weed.
- Are there **woody weeds in what you aim to smother?** That's a different story from smothering sod! Woody plants' new growth can lift paper and mulch. When the paper rises in an area left fallow for the growing season, the eruption stands out like a beacon. The gardener sees it and cuts that plant down. Cut repeatedly, it starves. In a bed planted immediately, however, such disturbances can hide between plants. Lifted paper and mulch that cascades from it can shade out or smother desirable plants before a gardener notices and intervenes.
- **Is the sod made up of plants that are not "good" lawn grass?** Watch out for weedy quack grass, very fast creeping lawn grasses such as centipede grass and surface-rooting weeds including ground ivy. If established in the smother area, these characters can be expected to extend running roots toward newspaper-free areas. They find their way by taking cues from soil temperature, lengthening roots more rapidly wherever it's warmer because mulch is thin or absent nearby. These plants are also capable of living on root alone far longer than Kentucky bluegrass or fine fescue. They can forego top growth until they can sprout from roots positioned below an opening. There they pop up, become established directly within new, desirable plants' root systems and become the devil to extricate.

It is true that **you can smother sod and plant right away**. However, I can only recommend if I also list some cautions. That pushes the simple idea well beyond the length of a Thumbs Up or Thumbs Down. See "Smother lawn and plant that day?"

The **exceptions** may not apply everywhere but when they do figure into the equation they **can drastically change the outcome**. Overlooking them and misreading the situation can cost a gardener time and effort.

As a professional gardener, you may not think twice about some of these -- you won't use same-day smothering where the lawn is a mix of "good" and "bad" grasses, for instance. That's because you know the bad plants are very unpredictable in their reaction. People without our experience won't thank us for leading them to believe otherwise.

A weed is a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson -

This week in Janet's garden **Grow with me! This week I will:**

Start cleaning up gardens as the soil drains and green shoots begin to appear. I'll cut first, to remove the perennial- and grass stems I left for winter interest, then rake to remove debris. Then I'll spread slow release fertilizer over the beds and begin to weed. I save a step, that of scratching in fertilizer, because what I spread before weeding will be mixed in as I work.



Think it's not spring yet? But snow crocuses (*C. minimus*) have come and gone already! Photo© 2008 Steven Nikkila

Cut back the plants I've overwintered, to be stock plants. From a special coleus handed down through generations, a scented geranium begged from a collector, an unbeatable fuchsia or sentimental rosemary I can make enough new plants to fill this year's pots and beds plus hand out as gifts to friends. It's a great time to cut -- it will **promote strong new shoots** that can become well rooted bedding plants by the end of May.

I cut the plants back to sturdy stems -- even to leaflessness. Then I put the plants in good light and **wait, being very careful about water**. I check by touch or weight of the pots to know it's time to water, since plants that needed water every 4 or 5 days when they were fully leafed out

may need none for two weeks as they grow back in. If I overwater, roots rot and my chances for vigorous new top growth, plummet.

When new growth becomes firm enough to snap, I **clip some three- to four-inch tips** and stick their bases into pots of moist, sharp sand. I give them good light in a terrarium or under some other clear tent to maintain high humidity. **They'll have roots in two weeks.**

Wrap-up... and down

Green thumbs up: To a **steadily advancing, cool spring** rather than one that see-saws between dramatic warm-ups and frosty relapses. **Big temperature changes are what cause big losses.** I love the springs when we don't worry about plants coaxed into early growth dying back during wintry encores.

Green thumbs down: To **thinking you must get "it" all done** -- whatever that "it" may be in any given garden or season. I've never found the gardener who is done, though I've looked high and low, among part-timers and pros, solo gardeners and masters of undergardeners. To be happy is to realize that gardening is what we are doing, not what we complete!

Who's Janet?

A professional gardener and educator since 1984, Janet Macunovich designs, plants and tends gardens through her business, Perennial Favorites. She teaches and writes about gardening at schools, conferences, in her books, this weekly column, the monthly Michigan Gardener and other publications. Email questions to her at JMaxGarden@aol.com.