

Fairy rings appearing on area lawns

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office

I was giving serious thought last Saturday to changing my usual work-time footwear from dress shoes to tennis shoes. After getting out of my car to go into a local store last Saturday, I decided to bring along my umbrella as the sky was turning darker and darker even though it was midday.

While I was in the store, I could hear the downpour of rain on the roof and the sound of thunder. I was thoroughly drenched by the time I traversed the parking lot to get to my car. I don't think I could have been more drenched had I made the walk back without an umbrella.

The squish-squish of wet dress shoes was not pleasant. Even though it was midday in mid-July in Texas, I drove home with the car heater turned on as the temperature had cooled and I was wet!

I was not elated by the circumstance. But then I thought about what it was like this time one year ago.

What a difference a year can make. The memory of week after week of record hot temperatures and record drought conditions during 2012 has a way of putting things in a more rational perspective.

The generous rainfall has also had other impacts in the landscape. Mushrooms have been suddenly appearing in lawns and they have caught the attention of concerned home-



PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson

owners. Some mushrooms enlarge to dinner plate-size behemoths!

Magic Or Fairies?

They're known as fairy rings. Some types of mushrooms in lawns occur in a here-and-there random pattern; however, fairy ring mushrooms occur in a distinctive circular (or semicircular) pattern. The question is, "Are they the result of magic or fairies?"

During the Middle Ages, the period when blood letting was common practice and flies were thought to arise from rotting meat, people had various ideas about where circles of mushrooms or other large fungal structures came from.

Some people thought the devil churned butter in the middle of the ring, while

other folks thought fairies danced in the center. Despite such stories, some considered it lucky to have fairy rings in a field near their house. You might, however, get a strong counter-argument from today's homeowners and turf managers who have fairy rings in their turf.

Mystery and mythology aside, fairy rings are caused by fungi. More precisely, we now know that fairy rings aren't made by fairies or the devil. They are the fruiting structures of underground fungi.

Several species of mushrooms or puffballs can form into fairy rings. Mushrooms or puffballs are the reproductive part that forms from fungal threads that live and grow in the soil or thatch — the layer of dead and living plant parts



July 18, 2012



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News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.



that develops between the grass and the soil surface.

A Common Thread

Fairy rings are typically seen from August through October, but that's not a hard and fast rule as this year has demonstrated. In some years, they're more common than others because they're sensitive to moisture, heat and other environmental conditions.

An obvious question is why do they grow in circles? The whole phenomenon begins with one small piece of fungal thread or a spore. From that tiny particle, a mass of threads radiates in all directions like the spokes on a wagon wheel. The fungus will keep growing, hidden from sight, until it runs out of a food source or the environment becomes unfavorable.

Fairy ring fungi don't directly infect lawns, but cause damage by interfering with water movement to the roots of grass plants. In order for the fungus to absorb nutrients, certain materials in the soil must be dissolved by the fungus into a usable form.

The grass is essentially fertilized by the byproducts of this process. The most active part of the fungus is at the outer edge of the ring, so that's where the fruiting bodies form and thus forming a circular pattern.

The common appearance of mushrooms in lawns and landscapes after significant rain can pose a potential hazard if eaten.

Mushrooms growing in the wild should not be eaten unless a responsible person recognizes them as safe. There is no safe rule-of-thumb to differentiate a poisonous mushroom from an edible mushroom.

So, what can you do if you want to get rid of a fairy ring? Fairy rings, as with other nuisance mushrooms or puffballs, are difficult to control since there are no effective and simple chemical procedures

available to homeowners. Most fairy rings are only present for a few years and eventually outgrow themselves.

If mushrooms in the lawn make you happy or provide a National Geographic moment to teach your children, or you're at least agreeable to letting Mother Nature take her course, then sit back, relax and enjoy the show. Watching mushrooms grow tends to be faster than watching grass grow.

