

Fairy Rings Showing up in Lawns

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



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Mushrooms growing in circles have been suddenly appearing in lawns and they have caught the attention of concerned homeowners. Many such mushrooms enlarge to dinner plate-size behemoths! They're known as fairy rings.

Rainfall has been rather generous over the past few weeks. As I was entering the parking lot of my grocery store about 2 weeks ago, I started giving serious thought about changing my footwear from dress shoes to tennis shoes. At least I had an umbrella with me 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 lightning and thunder. I was thoroughly drenched by the time I traversed the parking lot to get back to my car.

The squish-squish of wet dress shoes was not pleasant. Even though it was a

mid-day in July in Texas, I drove home with the car heater turned on as the temperature had become considerably cooler and I was wet!

I was not elated by the circumstance. But then I thought about what it was like during the summer of 2011—a record year for drought and





temperatures. When someone can remember the year of a record drought and temperatures, you understand how serious it was. The memory of week-after-week of record hot temperatures and record drought conditions during 2011 has a way of putting things in a more rational perspective. That's one reason I do not complain much about rainy weather especially during the summer season.

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 homeowners. Some mushrooms quickly develop into dinner plate-size behemoths!

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, how-

ever, 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 that develops between the grass and the soil surface).

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 useable 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 kids, 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.

