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## Tips for a shady lawn

Grass does not grow well in shade. While we like green grass underneath our tall trees, Mother Nature has other plans. We are asking a lot from our urban landscapes when we expect good lawns under shade trees.

### A delicate balancing act

Let's first understand why turf grass has difficulty growing under trees.

- Plants need sunlight for photosynthesis, which creates food for energy. The less sunlight, the less food the plant can create. Fertilizer is not plant food, but rather the building blocks the plant uses to grow leaves and roots. Without enough energy to grow, a plant won't thrive no matter how much fertilizer you provide. So over-fertilizing does not actually solve problems in a shady lawn, but creates more.

- Turfgrass roots have to compete in compacted soil with tree roots. Trees have extensive root systems that limit the moisture and nutrients available to the grass plants. Poor root development makes plants weaker and less drought tolerant.
- Shady areas contend with either too much moisture or not enough. Shaded areas do not dry out as quickly during wet seasons, which create conditions for moss growth. During drier seasons, tree roots suck up available moisture leaving conditions too dry to support healthy turf grass.

### Positive reinforcements

The amount of shade, type of trees and turfgrass, and cultural practices all contribute to the overall health of the lawn. Here are some suggestions for cultural practices that you can use to encourage healthier turf in the shade.

- Mow less frequently. The taller the grass is in the shade, the more surface area it has to take in more sunlight.
- Over-seed, slit-seed or spot-seed as necessary to incorporate new grass seed to the lawn to replace grass that has died off. Select turfgrass varieties that are better suited to the shade.
- Water regularly and for longer periods of time. Avoid short, shallow watering cycles.
- Thin and limb up tree branches. This will increase sun light and air circulation to reduce excessive moisture during wet times of the year.
- Aerate regularly to promote turfgrass root development. Aerating alleviates soil compaction, and increases surface drainage, which minimizes moss development. Further, it allows moisture, air and nutrients to get straight to the roots, strengthening their development.
- Reduce fertilizer applications to the lawn in shady areas by about 50% to prevent thinning of the lawn. Consider installing beds or ground cover in very shady areas.

Growing grass in shady lawn areas is difficult. Generally speaking, the quality of turfgrass in the shade will not be as good as turfgrass in full sun. If having high-quality turfgrass in shady areas is important, then plan to seed regularly and follow these cultural practices.

