

Moss, algae, lichen and slime moulds

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Moss is a very common problem, but several other primitive plants can occur in lawns, too. They prosper most where the conditions do not favour healthy grass growth.

Q What exactly is moss?

A There are many species of moss, and a few are common lawn weeds. They are simple plants with thin cell walls that need a moist atmosphere to survive and reproduce. Wet, shady places are ideal for them. They are often found growing under grasses in lawns. Although they don't flower and seed, they do produce masses of dust-like spores. These germinate into tiny filaments which eventually turn into the familiar feathery growth.

Spores are usually produced in the autumn, and again in the spring. Mosses that produce spores in the autumn survive into the spring to spore again, along with the plants from the autumn spores. When the weather turns hot and dry, the plants die out, but the spores survive and will grow when autumn rains return.

Q Why does moss grow in lawns?

A Moss grows in lawns when the conditions favour its growth, and if the growing conditions for lawn grasses are not at their optimum. When the grass is in full growth, moss is unable to compete. Mosses are favoured by low soil fertility, low pH (acid soils), compaction of the soil surface, poor drainage, lack of aeration, shade and sparse grass growth.

Q Could I mistake moss for anything else?

A Pearlwort (*Sagina procumbens*) is a compact weed that looks very like a moss at first glance. But, it has tiny white flowers between May and September, and is darker green and not as feathery. To remove pearlwort from your lawn, treat with a weedkiller containing mecoprop-P.

Q Is it absolutely necessary to control moss?

A Although moss looks nice and green in winter, it dies back in summer, leaving unattractive brown patches. Moss on its own will not tolerate wear - feet and mowers will leave marks, and it can wear away altogether, leaving bald patches. Dead moss accumulates as 'thatch' at the base of the grass, preventing air and water from reaching the roots of the grass.

Q Does mowing affect moss?

A Close mowing can seriously weaken lawn grasses; they become sparse and cannot compete with weeds and moss. Aim to keep the grass 20mm in height. Mow regularly - during the growing season, utility lawns should be cut three times a fortnight. Longer, coarser grass can encourage moss, too. Aim to cut this to less than 25mm.

Q How can moss in lawns be discouraged?

A The best way to discourage moss is to encourage the grass. Lawn grasses generally grow best on fertile, well-drained which gets plenty of sun. Most lawn grasses prefer neutral or slightly alkaline soil. Lawns growing on poor, sandy soils need feeding at least once a year and preferably twice. Different formulations of fertiliser are needed for spring and autumn applications, which should be applied when the soil is moist and the weather warm.

The pH of soils that are very acidic can be raised by the application of lime (ground chalk or limestone) during the winter at a rate of 60g per square metre. However, to be on the safe side, it is best to test the soil pH, either using a cheap test kit from the garden centre, or for more accuracy a full soil analysis. *Which Gardening?* provides a soil analysis service - telephone 0845 307 4000 for details. One drawback of adding lime is that fine lawn grasses do best where the soil is acidic. Around pH 5.5 is ideal, so take care if you require a bowling-green finish.

Q What about problem areas?

A Drainage and soil aeration, particularly of compacted areas, can be improved by spiking with a

garden fork to a depth of at least 7.5cm, or by hollow tining.

Hollow tining removes a core of soil, which should be allowed to dry on the surface before being raked up. This is then followed by top dressing with a mixture of loam, sand and sieved organic matter brushed into the holes. The top dressing should vary depending on the type of soil. Heavy soils should be dressed with a sandy mixture, while sandy soils should be dressed with a mixture largely of organic matter. You can buy manual hollow tinners, which are hard work, or hire a hollow tine machine.

Lawn grasses grow most vigorously in open areas and growth becomes weaker as shade increases. Densely shaded areas are never likely to support good lawn growth. If shade can't be reduced, try thinning or removing overhanging trees. Alternatively, consider replacing the lawn with groundcover plants, shingle, bark-chip mulch or paving.

Q Are there any chemicals for controlling moss in lawns?

A Ferrous sulphate is an option for treating large areas. It is found in lawn sand, which also contains fertilisers that encourage the lawn to green up.

Q When is the best time to control moss in lawns?

A Chemical controls are best applied in spring, when active moss growth resumes, or in autumn, before the onset of severe frosts.

Q What should I do with the dead moss?

A After applying a mosskiller, any moss in the lawn will turn

black and die. However, it will be necessary to rake out the dead moss as its presence will continue to hinder the growth of the lawn. The raked-out moss makes an excellent contribution to the compost heap. Feed the lawn with a seasonally suitable fertiliser and lightly top dress if necessary. Sowing seed in sparse areas can be carried out in spring or early autumn.

Q What do algae on lawns look like?

A Algae on lawns may appear as blue-green masses or may be brown and gelatinous in nature. They cause no serious damage to grass but are unsightly and become slippery when wet.

Q How can algae on lawns be controlled?

A Algae is most often found where areas of the lawn are compacted and poorly drained. If the lawn is aerated, either with a garden fork or a hollow-tine aerator, and top-dressed with a sandy loam, compaction will be alleviated and drainage improved. Aeration is best carried out when the soil is moist. Lawn sands containing ferrous sulphate, used to kill moss on lawns, will also be effective in controlling algae.

Q How will I recognise lichen in my lawn?

A There are many types of lichen, which are primitive plants made up of algae and fungi. The most common type on lawns is dog lichen. This grows as greyish, flattened scales, in clusters about 2cm or so across. They are soft and slimy when wet and crisp when dry.

Q How do I get rid of lichen?

A Lichen won't harm lawn grass,

but it can look unsightly, and be slippery when wet. It is a sign of poor grass growth. Rake out the lichen, and improve the growing conditions for the grass, as described in the section on moss. You can add the lichen to the compost heap.

Q What are slime moulds?

A Slime moulds are fungus-like organisms which are white, or yellow/orange in colour and produce small, grey fruiting bodies which release purplish spores on to the blades of grass.

Q What damage do slime moulds do to lawns?

A Slime moulds do not harm lawn grasses but masses of spores can look rather unsightly on a well-kept lawn.

Q How do I get rid of slime moulds?

A There are no chemical controls for slime moulds, but the purplish-brown spores can be washed from the blades of grass with a jet of water from a hose.