

Lawn of the Future Features Little Care

The ideal home lawn of the future will turn bright green in the spring, grow only one and one-half inches tall during the season, and just "sit there looking great" until winter.

Unfortunately, such lawns are still many years away, despite efforts to develop successful growth regulators, according to Dr. Thomas L. Watschke, assistant professor of turfgrass science at The Pennsylvania State University. He says side effects from using growth regulators still outnumber benefits.

Dr. Watschke and associates have studied turfgrass growth regulators for two years at Penn State. They point out several side effects from applying these growth regulators to home lawns.

First, and most important, is the discoloration that follows the

application. Tests at Penn State have shown that such growth regulators severely discolor lawn-type grass for up to three weeks. Lower rates will reduce the discoloration, but do very little to reduce growth.

Secondly, commercially available regulators retard the growth of plant organs other than leaves, including roots, rhizomes, and runners. This places the grass in a condition where it might not compete adequately with weeds and insects.

Thirdly, plant resistance to disease attack is lowered when placed under the chemical stress of retarded growth. At Penn State, grass injured by growth retardants has shown a much higher level of disease susceptibility.

Fourthly, after the effect of the growth retardant has diminished,

a growth stimulation occurs. By weighing clippings from treated versus untreated plots, Dr. Watschke and associates have found that generally, after 4 weeks, the yield from the treated plots begins to exceed that of the plots that were never treated. This observation dramatically demonstrates the need for repeat applications for season-long retardation. Unfortunately, the time for reapplication coincides with the higher temperatures of summer. High temperatures magnify injury from growth regulators.

Where does all this leave the problem of home lawn mowing? At this point in time, exactly where it was before. However, on the positive side, industry has stepped up efforts to formulate new growth regulator compounds. This year at Penn State,

four new experimental compounds are being tested. Preliminary results have shown increased activity by some compounds with less injury to turf. Work on other crops has shown that some experimental compounds do not inhibit roots as much as currently available materials.

Continued research with

growth regulators may someday lead to materials that will be effective without adverse side effects. Some materials are presently being marketed, but they all bring with them the problems previously discussed.

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