Sand mounds abound

A sure sign of spring are the mountains of sand that people have delivered to their home with the intent of spreading it on their lawns. One person in the neighborhood having sand delivered seems to start an avalanche of topdressing.

Technically, topdressing is the application of soil to the turf surface. Topdressing turf is probably most associated with golf greens, where a sand or sand/peat mixture is used to help with drainage and aid in smoothing the putting surface.

In home lawns, topdressing to fill in low spots or level uneven areas can be beneficial. Bumpy, rough, uneven lawns are annoying, difficult to mow, and allows water to puddle—which can damage the turf’s root system.

To fill a low spot, shovel the sand, no more than one-half inch deep, into the area. Use a broom to sweep the sand off the grass blades and sift it down as far as possible. Maintain the lawn normally until the grass has grown on top of the first layer. Repeat until the low spot is filled.

When used to even out a bumpy lawn and done properly, topdressing can be helpful. Done incorrectly, topdressing can be disastrous for the lawn.

The problem is that it is very difficult to evenly spread the sand in a timely manner. Homeowners start with the best intentions of spreading the sand consistently and finishing by the end of the day only to find that the job is tedious and lots of hard work. The sand pile remains in the same spot for days shading out and frequently killing the grass below. Once the initial enthusiasm wanes, just trying to reduce the mountain of sand overcomes the objective of spreading it consistently and evenly over the lawn. The end result is dozens of small mounds of sand all over the lawn.

 Routinely applying a layer of soil or sand to a lawn can cause more damage than good. You can introduce weed seeds, nematodes and even diseases with some sources of lawn dressing. Ideally, topdressing soil should be free of weeds and nematodes (sterilized is ideal) and should be of the same soil type as that on which the turf is growing.
Topdressing can also create layers in the soil. Layering in soils is something easy to get into and difficult to mitigate. A well-regarded agronomist once professed that, "Layering. . . it is desirable in cakes but not in turf."

Homeowners are sometimes convinced that topdressing will improve the condition of their lawn by increasing the spread and thickness of their turf.

“Topdressing home lawns has minimal agronomic benefits” according to Dr. J. Bryan Unruh, Extension Turfgrass Specialist at the University of Florida and co-author of The Florida Lawn Handbook. When asked his advice for homeowners on topdressing, his reply was “don’t”.

Top-dressing your lawn with sand on a regular basis is not a recommended practice. While minor low spots can be corrected this way, you can easily overdo it and smother your lawn. Using topsoil from an unknown source may also introduce undesirable plants and weeds into the landscape, creating additional work and expense to correct the problem.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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