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JOHN'S CORNER:

TIP OF THE WEEK

by John Ferguson

A question came in asking, "How can I help my lawn recover from the damage due to the recent hard freeze?"

There are several things one can do to help the lawn recover quickly; however, what is required depends on what was done last fall before the freeze and how the lawn was cared for.

I will use my own St. Augustine lawn for an example.

Ideal Case:

I have used organic methods to care for my lawn for almost 40 years now and my gumbo clay has turned into a rich loam full of earthworms, microbes and other life. My grass continued to grow (slowly) to almost Thanksgiving and then stayed green until the hard freeze. I quit mowing in October and when the hard freeze hit, the grass was about five inches tall. This thick layer protected the runners from damage so they are just waiting for spring weather to start growing again.

In a couple more weeks or less when the weather warms up a little more I will prepare to mow off the dead grass. First, I will sharpen my mulching mower blade and then mow the lawn to four inches tall. Only cutting a little bit of the dead at one time allows the mulching blade to chop up the dead grass into very little pieces that settle into the soil. I will lower my lawnmower blade another inch and repeat. If there is still a lot of dead grass visible, I might repeat a third time and inch lower. This provides a rich mulch to protect the runners and new grass blades will easily punch through the layer.

My soil is biologically alive hence the finely cut grass pieces will be quickly be biodegraded by the fungus and earthworms and all the nutrients contained in the dead grass will be returned to the soil. The dead grass clippings has the exact amount of major, minor and trace minerals in



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perfect proportions that the new grass will require. It becomes my spring fertilization saving the cost of buying fertilizers.

Next, I will apply about 1/4 inch layer of leaf mold compost to the lawn. The very dark almost black color of the compost absorbs sunlight converting the light energy of the sun into heat energy or warmth. Think about placing your hand on a dark car that has been sitting in the sun. This process warms the soil, which stimulates the grass to grow and the microbes to breakdown the dead grass and turn it into humus. The humus produced along with the compost will help your soil store water and protect the grass in our hot summers. Note: I have not had to water my lawn or landscape for over three years. This also saves a lot of money on the water bills.

Every other year I will apply one bag of Microlife 6-2-4 organic fertilizer (my favorite) and every 4-5 years I will apply 40 pounds of greensand per 1,000 square feet. I do not need any additional fertilization to have a beautiful lawn and landscape.

The turf is so thick and strong it chokes out all weeds so I never need herbicides, weed and feeds, etc. I do not get turf diseases or insect pests hence I save time, labor and money there also.

Case 2: New organic lawn

Mow as described above; apply the Microlife 6-2-4 organic fertilizer and the greensand (40 pounds/1,000 square feet) if one has never done it. Greensand is full of minor and trace elements. These are to plants sort of like vitamins are to humans, if we are missing even a little then we are not as healthy. In grass and plants, this shows up as insect and disease issues. Follow with an application of fine screened leaf mold compost at least 1/4 inch but not more than 1/2 inch at one time. Nature will take over from here and the grass should quickly start growing and green up.

Note: This only applies if one did not cut their grass close (less than 3 inches) before the hard freeze. IF it had been mowed short, then there is a possibility that the runners (stolons) were killed and one will need to re-sod.



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Case 3: Toxic chemical lawn

The salts from the artificial fertilizers, pesticides for cinch bugs or webworms, and fungicides for brown patch or other diseases have killed off most of the life in your soil. In this case, the grass cuttings will not quickly break down and should be removed from the lawn. This means bagging the clippings and removing them.

The soil is most likely compacted from the chemical abuse and will need a core aeration to help open it up. Depending on how short the grass was cut, the stolons may be dead (no green visible) and one may need to re-sod.

Now one can follow the guidelines in case 2 above for fertilizer, greensand, and compost.

Note: When plants and turf grass are grown organically, they are healthier; hence, they tend to have 4-5 degrees better cold tolerance and 4-5 degrees better heat tolerance.