

Laura Phillips
District Extension Agent, Horticulture

De-Thatch Your Warm Season Lawn

If you have a warm-season turf grass, like bermudagrass or zoysiagrass, now is the time to think about dethatching. Thatch refers to the layer of dead grass and roots that build up between your living grass and the soil.

Normally, thatch is not a problem. In fact, a healthy layer of thatch less than ½ inch thick can provide insulation from temperature fluctuations and help conserve soil moisture. But when thatch gets more than ½ inch thick, it can cause serious issues for your lawn. Thick thatch can harbor pests and diseases that attack your turf, and it can lead to poor root growth for your grass.

So, when the thatch in your lawn gets thick, it's time to dethatch. Because these operations thin the lawn, they should be performed when the lawn is in the best position to recover. For warm season grasses that time is June through July. Buffalograss, our other common warm-season grass, normally does not need to be dethatched.

Thatch is best kept in check by power-raking and/or core-aerating. If thatch is more than ¾ inch thick, the lawn should be power raked. Set the blades just deep enough to pull out the thatch. The lawn can be severely damaged by power-raking too deeply. In some cases, it may be easier to use a sod cutter to remove the existing sod.

Bermudagrass will often come back if rhizomes remain in the soil. If not, you will need to start over with seed sprigs or plugs. If thatch is between one-half and a ¾- inch, thick, core-aeration is a better choice. The soil-moisture level is important to do a good job of core-aerating. It should be neither too wet nor too dry, and the soil should crumble fairly easily when worked between your fingers. Go over the lawn enough times so that the aeration holes are about 2 inches apart.

Excessive thatch accumulation can be prevented by not over-fertilizing with nitrogen. Frequent, light watering also encourages thatch. Water only when needed and attempt to wet the entire root zone of the turf with each irrigation. Finally, where thatch is excessive, control should be viewed as a long-term, integrated process (i.e., to include proper mowing, watering, and fertilizing) rather than a one-shot cure. One power-raking or core-aeration will seldom solve the problem.