

Expert tips for a lawn that's a cut above

BY JON VANZILE | SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

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The reputation of grass has taken a few hits recently.

Some landscape experts have been advising South Florida gardeners to reduce the green stuff. Grass, they say, hogs water and needs loads of fertilizer and pesticides to look good. Others label grass as an environmental disaster painted green.

But Bob Imbrigiotta, author of *The Journey to a Bulletproof Lawn* and a holder of two patents for his grass-maintenance system, disagrees. Our Florida grass isn't bad, he says. It's merely misunderstood.

Under the right conditions, it hardly ever needs water or fertilizer. If you really know what you're doing, you can even stop the surge growth in the rainy months. As a result, Imbrigiotta says a few of his test lawns rarely need mowing, are only watered a dozen times a year, and require a modest amount of fertilizer and no pesticide.

Oh yeah, and they look great.

"At the highest level, I've identified the ideal state for St. Augustine grass that makes it beautiful inside and out," he said. "This leads to infrequent watering, fertilizing and mowing."

Imbrigiotta has partnered with Botanical Visions of Boca Raton to offer his grass-maintenance program to commercial properties, such as homeowners' associations. The pitch is simple: It's cost-effective because you mow less, water less and fertilize less, and it's environmentally sound.

"The economic impact is tremendous," said his partner Bill Reeve, president of Botanical Visions. "A large homeowners' association might do 20 or 30 cuts a year. You reduce the amount of cuts and the savings is astronomical, the environmental impact is tremendous."

And while Imbrigiotta doesn't divulge all his secrets — that would invite patent infringement — it's clear the average homeowner could learn from him.

He has developed a patented system of buried water diverters, made from a special clay material, that control and contain runoff. Not only does this conserve water, it reduces the fertilizer and pesticide that drains into the ground water through storm-water sewers.

Although designed for larger grass fields, Imbrigiotta tested and perfected his diverters in residential yards in Fort Lauderdale. One of those yards belonged to Peter Schweitzer, a homeowner in Fort Lauderdale.

"My front yard has a high crown," Schweitzer said. "Any time I watered or it rained, the water ran off, so the grass was always short and dry."

To prevent runoff, Imbrigiotta dug a trench around the crown of the yard and installed an underground clay barrier. The barrier itself is not large — less than a foot wide and less than a foot tall — and it is completely hidden underground.

"Now when I get rain, that whole area retains moisture," Schweitzer said. "It's much greener. It's really worked well. It's a terrific idea and a simple idea."

According to Imbrigiotta, most yards don't need to be encircled with water diverters. A few selectively placed diverters will discourage underground runoff and hold the water in place.

The next step in his system involves aeration. St. Augustine grass grows in long creepers that, over time, form a mat on the ground. Eventually, dead creepers knit together into a thick layer of thatch. Water can't get through it, and fertilizer just washes off. Thatch also encourages fungus and chinch bugs.

The solution, Imbrigiotta says, is to buy a simple device that punches holes in the thatch and encourages the grass to dig deep into the soil. His choice is the professional-grade Plugger, which is available at sourceonex.com/plugger/html. Hand-held aerators are also available.

After controlling for runoff and thatch buildup, change your regular yard-care habits. This means reducing fertilizer, which encourages rapid, shallow growth, which means more mowing and more thatch.

And, finally, there's water. Less is more, he says. Water less frequently, but deeply — laying down about 1 inch with each watering — and only water when the grass needs it. During the rainy season, that might mean not at all, and during the slow-growth winter, that might mean just once a week.

"I live in Imperial Point," he said. "Most of the residents followed the rules during the most serious water restrictions and a lot of people were surprised that their yards could survive."

Ultimately, most experts agree that South Florida gardeners are going to have to adapt to a future with less water and more restrictions. But, according to Imbrigiotta, that doesn't mean we can't still have lush yards.

"God has created a wonderful system in St. Augustine grass," he said.

For more information, see bulletprooflawn.com or call 954-675-9764.

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Reading the lawn signs

When St. Augustine is thirsty, the blades will fold into a V-shape. This naturally occurs during the hottest part of the day, so wait until evening before turning on the sprinklers. Truly thirsty lawns have a blue cast to the grass.

Here are tips for an environmentally sound and low-maintenance yard from Bob Imbrigiotta:

Mow on the highest setting, leaving at least 2 ½ or 3 inches of grass. If the grass is cut too low, the thatch will build up more quickly.

Install a rain gauge and measure how much water your sprinkler system is using. Aim for at least ½-inch with every watering.

Don't break out the pesticide at the first sign of problems. Address the underlying problems and the bugs will eventually leave. Chinch bugs are usually a sign of a stressed-out, unhealthy lawn.

Consider having your soil tested to see how much fertilizer it actually requires and in what proportion. Some of Imbrigiotta's test yards haven't needed any nitrogen, phosphorus or potassium in several years.

— JON VANZILE