

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO BY **William M. Johnson**

Many local residents have reported higher than usual populations of asp caterpillars. While most caterpillars encountered in the home landscape do not sting, several species of stinging caterpillars, including asp caterpillars, occur in our Gulf Coast growing region.

The prevailing topics of horticulture-related e-mails and phone calls I receive in any given week are reliable barometers for gardening issues that many other gardeners across the county are likely to be dealing with.

Brown Patch Disease in Lawns

Over the past two weeks, I've received numerous inquiries about problems with lawns. Many resi-

dents were concerned about the appearance of small to large spots in their lawns that became noticeably discolored. The most recent e-mail I received on lawn problems asked the following: "What are all of the brown dead spots in my lawn? I see them all over the neighborhood." While lawn grasses can suffer from several different diseases, the

most likely problem during this time of year is commonly known as brown patch. Brown patch is caused by a fungal pathogen known as *Rhizoctonia solani*. Although the spots start out very small, typically homeowners do not start noticing the spots until they reach several inches in diameter. Diseased areas start as very small spots that



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continue to expand during the moderate temperatures of the fall season. Spots can expand to a diameter of 8 feet or wider under favorable conditions.

Descriptions of small spots typically make reference to the blades of grass along the outer edge of spots being yellow or yellowish/orange in color. As the fungal pathogen grows outward, it colonizes healthy blades which turn yellow. As the infection process continues, blades are killed and turn brown (hence the common name given to this disease). The combination of fairly warm temperatures and ample rainfall over the fall season has provided unusually favorable conditions for brown patch to thrive in many area lawns. Brown patch is most problematic on St. Augustine lawns but it also occurs on Bermuda and zoysia lawns as well.

Homeowners generally want to know if they should apply a fungicide to treat brown patch. Although brown patch does not usually kill the grass, it will cause the leaves to slough off and make for a thin area in the lawn where weeds can get a stronghold. Infected spots will typically produce new growth as the spring season progresses. Given the very cool temperatures that occurred over the weekend, lawn growth will slow down and so will develop of the brown patch disease. I recommend not spraying this time of the year.

However, if your lawn grass has brown patch disease this fall, the probability is high that the disease will reappear next fall. I recommend delaying treatment for brown patch until next year in late summer after daytime temperatures first drop into the upper eighties.

Apply a fungicide to the entire lawn next year in late summer before disease symptoms occur. Fungicides that have good activity on brown patch include the active ingredients myclobutanil (such as Spectracide's Immunox Lawn Disease Control), or propiconazole (Ortho's Lawn Disease Control), thiophanate-methyl (Scotts' Lawn Fungus Control) or triadimeton (Bayer's Advanced Fungus Control for Lawns). Follow the application rates provided on directions on the fungicide label.

Asp Caterpillars

A common inquiry in other e-mails and phone calls was about high populations of insects commonly called asp caterpillars.

The following is an excerpt from an e-mail: "Why are asp caterpillars so abundant in Galveston this year? I have lived here for 25 years and this is the first that I've heard of them. I was recently stung by one and it was a nightmare. The pain kept me up all night."

Coincidentally, I was surprised to find a small asp caterpillar on the sill of an entrance door to the AgriLife Extension Office.

While most caterpillars encountered in the home landscape do not sting, several species of stinging caterpillars occur in our Gulf Coast growing region. Stinging caterpillars have stiff poisonous hairs or spines on their bodies which are connected to poison glands. When a person comes into contact with the spines they break and venom is released.

Reaction to this venom varies from mild to severe. Small children and the elderly can have severe reactions. Injury from these caterpillars is most common among children playing in yards and trees. Asp caterpillars are also known as puss caterpillar because of their resemblance to a cuddly house cat.

Insecticides that provide good control of asp caterpillars include spinosad as an active ingredient (such as Green Light's Lawn and Garden Spray or Monterey's Garden Insect Spray).