

THE FAIRY RINGS OF SUMMER

by *Bill Carlos*, Horticulturist

Washoe County Cooperative Extension

June is a popular month for rings. The kind that go around newlyweds' fingers and the kind that show up in lawns. The lawn variety are called 'fairy rings' and unlike the marriage kind, they are not easy to remove.

Appearing in spring or early summer, these circular or arc-shaped rings may reveal themselves as either rings of brown, dead-appearing grass or circles of fast-growing, dark green blades of grass. The rings can range from 4 to 12 inches in width and 5 to 60 feet in diameter, with most of them producing mushrooms.

There are three types of fairy ring. Type 1 exhibits a zone of dead grass with one or two zones of stunted turf and mushrooms. Type 2 shows itself as a single ring of stimulated grass with some new evidence of mushrooms. Type 3 exhibits only mushrooms, with no visible effect on grass. In all three types, mushrooms will show up for a short period of time when the soil conditions are just right, usually in the spring or fall, or following a good rain. Unless you are an expert at identifying edible varieties of mushrooms, don't attempt to eat them. They may be toxic to humans and should be hand picked or mowed as soon as they appear.

How Fairy Ring Begins

The rings begin as a growth of fungus that starts at a central point and grows outward at a rate of 1 to 2 feet per year. Eventually, they will grow right out of the lawn. In addition to being unsightly, they can also cause damage to the lawn.

It is not known if fairy ring is started by the white, hair-like fungal mass known as a fungal mycellium or by germination of the fungal spore produced in mushrooms. Researchers have attempted to produce fairy ring under experimental conditions

but have been unsuccessful. They have found however, that the fungus begins to grow in either the soil itself or in the thatch layer above the soil. Thatch is the accumulation of dead roots and shoots produced by the lawn.

The fungus lives by decomposing organic matter and moves deeply into the soil, forming a dense, thread-like network of white mycellium that penetrates the soil to a depth of 10 to 20 inches. Some reports indicate that the fungal mass reached as much as two feet.

The lush, dark green grass forming around the ring is caused by nitrogen released by the fungus as it decomposes the organic matter in the soil. The dark green is more pronounced if the surrounding lawn needs fertilizing. By contrast, the dead or dry zone is the result of insufficient moisture. The network of mycellium growing through the pores of the soil prevents water from reaching the plant's roots.

TREATMENT IS DIFFICULT

Unfortunately there has been limited success treating fairy ring with fungicides and chemical wetting agents. This is partially the result of the difficulty in distributing the fungicide uniformly through the infected area.

If the fairy ring has recently appeared, there is a chance of controlling by drenching the area with a fungicide, with or without a wetting agent. Some spotty success has also been achieved by drilling 1/4 inch to 1-1/2 inch diameter holes, 18 to 24 inches deep and spaced 6 to 10 inches apart. The fungicide is then applied directly into the holes.

Special watering techniques can also be helpful. Try using a tree root watering wand or punch holes