Express News

Distribute 01-07-2016

Sustainable Winter Turf, Smart Strategy

You may be one of the environmentally aware gardeners that made a resolution to use more sustainable gardening strategies in 2016. If your resolution included plans to use less pesticide, less irrigation, and even more naturalized plants, consider Sustainable Winter Turf (SWT).

Sustainable Winter Turf is the concept that Dr. Jerry Parsons, my colleague on the Gardening South Texas Radio Show, and I developed when our St Augustine lawns became more shaded and we came to appreciate the winter weeds that infested (now we say “enhanced” ) the shade and drought affected lawns.

For several years we have mobilized our lawn care resources to support the St Augustine lawn and protect it from drought, shade, and weeds. Despite our best efforts, however, the lawns have declined. Last year we discussed the concept of a new lawn strategy, and this year we have embraced it. Instead of directing all our resources and efforts to produce an acceptable summer St Augustine lawn, we have shifted to the more sustainable concept of a winter turf dominated by such desirable weeds as horseherb, rescue grass, and annual bluegrass.

If you have a St Augustine lawn in the shade it is not going to be thick and prosperous. The winter weeds have been working to cover the St Augustine area every winter. In our case the weeds have become more successful every year. In recognition of a futile unwinnable war, and our belief that the winter weeds don’t hurt the St Augustine lawn in the shade, Jerry and I have switched sides and declared the former weeds to be our primary lawn—the new Sustainable Winter Turf. Consider the following cultural practices and join us in this environmentally appropriate decision.

Annual bluegrass, rescue grass and other winter weed grasses will naturalize in shady areas where the St Augustine grass is thin. Instead of trying to prevent them with a pre-emergent herbicide, or kill them with a contact herbicide, mow them every 2 weeks. The Sustainable Winter Turf will look great until about April 1.

Another key plant in the WST is horseherb. Horseherb is the low growing reseeding perennial with small leaves and yellow flowers. It will fill bare ground in the shade or the sun. Horseherb is a broadleaf weed that is very difficult to control with a contact herbicide. Forego your control efforts and take advantage of the tough plants ability to form a thick cover in thin, hard packed soil where the winter grasses have trouble growing. Like annual bluegrass and rescue grass, horseherb responds very well to mowing.

In addition to reduced herbicide use, the Sustainable Winter Turf will allow you to reduce your lawn irrigation. A St Augustine lawn in deep shade is not going to form a thick turf whether it is heavily watered or not. The WST does not require irrigation. Save the water and take advantage of the Sustainable Winter Turf strategy!