

Ask The Plant Groom(tm) by Dale Groom, The Plant Groom(tm)

QA1082

I follow your column in the local newspaper and thought I'd send you a few questions. A published answer is not necessary but an email would be great! I live where the soil is very sandy. Here are my questions:

What kind of evergreen shrub would you recommend for a partial sun/full shade windbreak/privacy screen? I only have about 4 foot for maximum spread. Height is not an issue.

I have a case of "disappearing" onions. I plant them, pull some to eat, and the rest of them disappear into the garden soil. It's not critters. Any ideas on what's happening to them? Do you think they are rotting into the soil? I've about given up on trying to grow them.

Is fall the best time to add major soil amendments to my garden space? People tell me to add lime. I'm planning on adding home-made compost, manure, peat and bagged topsoil. Any other suggestions?

Thanks for your help. - R. R.

Congratulations on your location because many Texas gardeners would love to have sandy soil.

Due to the narrow 4' dimension you have established I recommend vines for your screen. Some of the best include Carolina Jessamine, Coral Honeysuckle and Cross Vine. They are all Water Wise natives once established and easy care possibilities for Texas landscapes and gardens.

If you are leaving your onions in the ground after they are ready to harvest they may be breaking down and "disappearing". All onions are ready to harvest when their tops break or lean over. I do not recommend using the garden as a store room once onions are ready to be harvested. I do recommend planting onion transplants in January and harvesting when their tops break/fall over.

Only add lime, fertilizer or other additives to amend soil pH and/or nutrients if a soil test recommends the need. All Texas Cooperative Extension, Texas A & M University System county offices have soil test forms and sample containers in their offices. Their locations and phone numbers are in your local directory. This information is also on-line at <http://texasextension.tamu.edu>, click on the top left hand corner at Contact Your County Office and then click on your specific county. If you wish, send me your request for a Soil Text Kit and include a self addressed long envelope with two 1st class stamps on it to Dale Groom, Soil Test Kit, Texas Cooperative Extension, Texas A & M University System, 10056 Marsh Lane, Suite B-101, Dallas, TX 75229. When received I will send you two sample containers and combination instruction sheet and soil test form.

Fall is an excellent time to improve soil anywhere in Texas and a super time to install winter hardy landscape plants including trees, shrubs and vines. All Texas soils whether light sandy soils you have or heavy clay soils benefit from the addition of organic matter. Organic matter may be added in the form of composts, brown Canadian sphagnum peat, bark mulches and other plant by-products. Do be careful when adding animal manures, make sure they have been composted first before applying.

Top soil has no specific definition other than it is suppose to be off of the top of the soil, Sandy loam, clay loam, sandy clay loam and other soil types are specific. If you wish to add "soil" to your gardens do specify what type when you purchase. It should also be guaranteed to be nut grass free. This true "pest" of a weed in a big pain in garden plantings and may be transported into our locations from purchased soil sources.

We recently moved into a new home with St. Augustine grass. At our previous home (only a couple of miles away), the St. Augustine is thick and lush green. Not so at our new home.

This is a relatively newly sodded yard -- probably as early this year as was possible. In this area, top soil is pretty good, but the red clay is only a foot or so down. We have been warned not to water too much because of lack of drainage.

Our St. Augustine has lots of runners that are very apparent. The grass is a pretty good green, but it is not thick at all. It was fertilized once in early April. We water with a sprinkler system, three times a week for 15 - 20 minutes a time. Should we water heavier but less often? Or, are we watering much as it is?

Please tell us how to have that thick lawn like we had before. Thank you so much for your help! - G. R.

Most Texas lawns will survive with 1" of water per week. It is best to irrigate thoroughly, deeply and less frequently rather than lightly and frequently. The best time of day to apply water is in the morning prior to 10am.

It may take a couple of seasons to bring your relatively new lawn up to the level you have previously enjoyed. The single most important physical activity we can do to help encourage a thick lawn is mow frequently. When mowing do make sure your mower's blade is sharp. Mow frequently enough to only remove approximately 1/3 of the grass blades/leaves height each time you mow.

Most soils in Texas are low in (N) nitrogen. A soil test will determine if this is the case in your lawn's soil. Soils low in nitrogen can not supply the most important nutrient necessary for vegetive and foliar growth of grass.

Beautiful lawns are grown on heavy black, red and other colors of clay soils.

Dale's Super Hot Texas Tips:

\* It's Texas and late summer, it's suppose to be hot! This year is a prime example of why we all would be wise to only utilize proven Water Wise plants in our landscapes and gardens.

\* When reading articles in print, on-line or other forms be sure the recommended plants will take Texas sun when full sun locations are recommended. This will avoid some disappointments with your plantings.

\* Remember, all plants utilized in Texas lawn, garden, landscape and other horticultural activities should be ... Texas tough.

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