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There is a New Pearl in the Pee Dee and its not Pretty

People from all over the Pee Dee call me when they have problems with their yard. Therefore, I look at hundreds of ugly yards each year. First, I ask the owners how they maintain their lawn. Most of the time the problem is caused by what they have or have not done. As Pogo would say, "We have met the enemy - and he is us." But sometimes things happen that are beyond the homeowner's control. One such problem is Ground Pearls.

Its not a very pretty situation when you have Ground Pearls. The symptoms of Ground Pearl injury are first a yellowing of the grass, followed by browning, and death. Ground Pearl damage becomes most noticeable when the grass is under stress due to drought, nutritional deficiencies, etc. Under stress conditions, the grass may not be able to withstand the added effects of the pearls and the grass will die. Centipede grass is aggressively attacked by ground pearls simply because it is not very competitive or vigorous.

The only widely accepted recommendation to control Ground Pearls is never bring them to your yard. Once they are in your yard you are out of luck. From that point on, you will have a hard time growing any type of grass. This is one of the reasons, I never bring soil from other yards or topsoil into my yard. Pure washed sand, since it is almost sterile, is the only soil I will bring into my lawn. Some individuals in the Florence area have tried removing and replacing the top layer of the soil to get rid of Ground Pearls. Because ground pearls can be found almost a foot deep in the soil, the removal of a few inches of topsoil is not adequate. Ground Pearls mostly damage grass and don't seem to damage most shrubs, trees, perennials, etc. In some lawns alternative plantings may be the only solution. Even my boss has this problem and has given up on growing grass. In our last conversation, along with alternative plantings of shrubs, he was going to try a groundcover like mondo grass or liriop and mow it to resemble a lawn grass. We really don't know if these plants will be damaged or not, but it is worth a try.

Ground Pearls are actually insects that feed on the roots of grass. They are called Ground Pearls because they resemble pearls. You can see them. To determine if you have Ground Pearls, take a sample of the soil from the green grass at the edge of the dead grass. Stir the soil in your hand in the bright sunlight. Ground Pearls will look like little pearls shining in the sun. To tell Ground Pearls from sand and other debris, crush them in your fingers and they will pop.

To learn the specifics on gardening we have both free and for-sale publications at our office. You may also visit our Home & Garden Information Center through our web site at www.clemson.edu/florence. I may be contacted through our web site, amelton@clemson.edu, or 661-4800.

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