

Green in a time of brown

Seth Nidever staff
reporter

Talk to Pro Turf owner Derik Jakusz long enough, and lawns start to sound like ailing patients in the hospital.

Jakusz promotes and uses a product called Turf Medix, a sprayed-on formulation designed to rescue lawns nearly done in by drought, high temperatures and tough watering restrictions.

The goal? Make lawns at least look green, keep the roots alive and hope for better things to come.

Normally, many homeowners this time of year would be seeding their Bermuda grass with rye grass seed. The heat-loving Bermuda turns brown in the winter, but rye grass does better in winter. Water it sufficiently, and you're supposed to have a nice green lawn.

Except — oops! — Hanford, Lemoore and Avenal are on two-day-a-week lawn watering restrictions until further notice.

Jakusz said those who follow the rules end up with a yellowing lawn that doesn't look good. Anybody with lush, green grass is probably a cheater.

Turf Medix is designed for the law abiders, Jakusz says, and it keeps the entire lawn a nice shade of green for up to three months, allows for some watering and can be mowed — albeit only lightly.

Do it properly and the roots of the grass below stay alive, but go dormant — waiting for wetter times to come.

Depending on how wet this coming winter is, there might be plenty of moisture falling to keep lawns green — two-day-a-week watering restrictions or not.

According to Jakusz, where the product really shines is in July, August and September. He saw a spike in demand this past summer.

“With these [watering] restrictions, it's nearly impossible to keep the grass green in the summertime,” he said.

Pro Turf's business is subtly shifting as drought bites deeper. Jakusz said he's shifting to products designed to help roots survive tough conditions on less water. He's cutting back on nitrogen-based fertilizers, which require more water.

He's also seeing demand for Turf Medix for special events such as weddings, when brown turf is undesirable for aesthetic reasons.

But there are other ways drought is changing homeowner practices and businesses like Pro Turf.

Some residents may be shifting to alternative ground cover — like rocks and bark — that doesn't need water. Justin Berna, store manager for E & B Landscape and Garden Supply in Hanford, said he's seeing a shift in that direction.

Drought-tolerant landscaping is not required for older homes, but for anything built after 2010 in Hanford, it's the law.

“We're seeing more of the rock sales,” Berna said. “A lot of people, they tell us, that's what they want to do.”

Others in the lawn care industry don't see much push in that direction yet.

“A lot of people love their grass,” said Aaron Odland, store manager for West Valley Supply Inc. in Visalia. “Nobody really wants to bite the bullet.”

That means headaches over automatic sprinkler systems. Many of the complicated set-ups have had their inadequacies exposed by watering restrictions. If nozzles don’t spray properly or provide total coverage, if there are leaks or if too much is applied, lawns are going to look spotty.

Jakusz said that in January or February, he’s planning to offer customers higher-tech sprinklers that will automatically adjust the watering to match soil water content, weather forecast and other factors. The trend mirrors a push for so-called “on demand” irrigation systems in commercial agriculture.

Earlier this year, Odland was wondering whether the drought-plagued summer of 2014 would be a turning point for local homeowners that would cause them to turn their back on high-maintenance grass.

Looking back, he doesn’t think it was.

“Nobody’s turning away from it yet,” he said.

The reporter can be reached at 583-2432 or sndever@hanfordsentinel.com. Follow him on Twitter [@SethN_HS](https://twitter.com/SethN_HS).