

Lawns hit hard with Ascochyta Leaf Blight June 1, 2018

We have received several reports of rapidly declining lawns after the Memorial Day weekend. This weekend Eastern Nebraska welcomed record warm temperatures and relatively dry conditions. These issues led to the decline of most cool-season lawn grass species (Kentucky bluegrass, tall fescue, and perennial ryegrass). Mowing that weekend appeared to worsen the disease symptoms. Closer inspection of affected leaves reveal dieback from the tip. Red-brown spots can also appear on the affected leaves.



Visual symptoms of Ascochyta leaf blight on a lawn in Lincoln after Memorial Day record heat.

The damage is the result of a disease called Ascochyta leaf blight. This is a disease we tend to see in late-spring and early summer. It is most pronounced when the weather shifts from cold and wet to hot and very dry. The weather during Memorial Day weekend was a perfect example. Lawns began to wilt quickly and the *Ascochyta spp.* developed overnight. It's commonly thought that mowing spreads the disease, but that is not the case. Instead, the physical traffic and weight of the mower further weaken the turf. This made it easier for the fungal pathogen to attack the foliage. Here's more information about this pathogen from Colorado State University Extension: <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/garden/02901.pdf>.

Ascochyta leaf blight is a stress-induced disease of the leaves. It doesn't impact the roots or crowns – the growing point of the plant. It is commonly associated with heat and drought, but over-watering and poor irrigation uniformity can also exacerbate this disease. There are very few labeled fungicides to cure the effects of Ascochyta. We tested several different classes of fungicides last year, and had poor results. The good news is this disease only affects the foliage and the damaged tissue will be mowed off over the next couple of weeks. In the meantime, try to reduce stress with adequate moisture, healthy mowing practices with a sharp mower, and the use of slow release fertilizers to slowly feed the stand through the summer.

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Traffic from mowers over wilting turf can help weaken the plant and intensify damage from Ascochyta leaf blight. It is not believed to spread the disease.



The leaves of Ascochyta leaf blight will have a stay colored appearance and leaf-tip dieback. The damaged tissue will soon be mowed off and the turf stand will recover.