

Lawns vs Trees

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A couple of weeks ago in this column, I wrote about choosing between lawns and wildflowers. After a discussion this morning with a gentleman, I was reminded that I also needed to discuss choosing between lawns and trees.

I hope by now everyone knows the benefits of trees, and I don't have to repeat how trees provide shade, cooling, and beauty, and aid in storm water management. Or how trees improve your home's resale value. Turfgrass does have its benefits, too, in preventing erosion and weeds, and providing an attractive yard and a safe play area. But as a card-carrying tree-hugger, I lean towards protecting our trees; it irks me to watch people trim and mutilate trees in order to grow more grass.

I'm often amused when I attend state horticulture trainings and observe the turfgrass guys sitting on one side of the room, and the tree guys sitting on the other side of the room, both glaring at the other. But they are only mimicking what occurs naturally in the landscape: trees and turfgrass do not belong together.

Trees provide shade not only to our homes and patios, but to the lawn area beneath them. Depending on the tree species, there can be either filtered sunlight or total darkness beneath the tree. Even the most shade-tolerant turfgrass species needs at least three hours of sunlight per day; so, while it may be possible to grow an acceptable lawn underneath a honey locust tree, it's practically impossible to do so under a maple or oak.

The root systems of trees and turfgrass compete for space underground. Several studies have shown that tree root development is reduced by grass competition. Not only do they compete for space, but turfgrass is much better at absorbing water from the soil than tree roots. Turfgrass roots also are better at absorbing fertilizer. Research has shown that trees growing in a turfgrass lawn produce much less growth than trees in a mulched area.

There's also the problem of lawn mowers damaging the trunks and surface roots of trees. This can damage the lawn equipment and lead to frequent replacement of the blade. It can also cause trunk and root rot, and lead to early tree death.

Whenever there is a conflict between trees and turfgrass, I recommend working to benefit the tree. Instead of trimming a tree to get more sunlight for turfgrass, I

recommend killing off the grass beneath a tree. Apply three to four inches of mulch to prevent weeds, and to keep the soil cool and moist. Plant shade-loving landscape plants, like hostas and azaleas. Fertilize the yard based on the tree's needs (remember, tree roots extend way beyond the edges of the branches), especially in regards to soil pH.

For more information on caring for trees and/or lawns, please contact me at the Purdue Extension Service, (812) 435-5287.