

### COASTAL GARDENER COLUMN

**Franklin Laemmlen, Ph.D.**

**Author's Notes:** Several weeks ago this column addressed the issue of lawns browning out in large patches. I attributed the problem to a lack of adequate irrigation, i.e. water stress, as the water requirements of the grass increase as temperatures rise during the summer.

A reader responded to the "drought stress" article with the fact that another problem should be considered. That problem is "soil compaction." He indicated that he cured the large browned out patches in his yard by "aerating" the lawn. He said after using an aerating machine on his front- and backyard, the brown areas disappeared very quickly "without changing my watering or fertilization practices." He further stated: "I think aeration is a well-kept secret for successful lawns. I used to think it was unnecessary in our sandy soil, but apparently sand can compact as tightly as other soil types."

This reader is correct, sandy soils do compact and that compaction can cause reduced water infiltration and reduce the ability of the grass roots to respire normally. Reduced respiration in the root system impairs the ability of the grass to use water efficiently.

**Q:** I have a nectarine tree, which produces good fruit, but each year much of the fruit is russeted with some fruit cracks before harvest. Can you help?

**A:** The russetting, in this instance, is the result of feeding injury caused by thrips. Thrips are a very small insect. Most species are less than one millimeter in length, often smaller than the size of the period at the end of this sentence. They feed on many crops. They have mouthparts that are like a file with which they scarp the surface cells on plants and then ingest the cell contents. In nectarines most of the damage is done in the spring when trees are in bloom. The thrips feed in the flowers on the very tiny fruit that is present. The feeding wounds on the small fruit are healed by scar tissue. The plant cells in scar tissue do not divide and grow as well as normal fruit epidermis cells, hence the fruit becomes russeted and often cracks as the scarred skin of the fruit cannot keep up with the normal growth rate of the developing fruit. Besides nectarines, thrips injury is common on backyard avocados, oranges, and other citrus, plums, peppers, and on other smooth-

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skinned fruits. Various species of thrips attack the foliage and flowers of a variety of ornamentals, also.

In most plants the damage is minimal and does not require control. However, if your nectarine or other fruit tree has injury present every year, the tree should be sprayed during the bloom period with insecticidal soap or pyrethrins. On ornamental plants acephate (Orthene™), malathion and spinosad (Success™) can be used. Use all plant protection products according to package label instructions for best results.

If you would like to receive a detailed discussion of thrips, contact the Coastal Gardener.

Send your landscape and garden questions to: **The Coastal Gardener, 624-A West Foster Road, Santa Maria, CA 93455.**