

# Impact

Sharing the difference CSU Extension makes in people's lives and their communities.

## Growing a healthier lawn

Front Range homeowners learn how to make better lawn care decisions through Extension's on-site lawn diagnosis program.

### Issue

Lawn problems rank among the top three homeowner landscaping concerns brought to Colorado State University Extension offices in urban and suburban counties. While some lawn problems can be diagnosed by phone or email, most require a site visit to confirm the cause of the lawn problem.

### Extension's Response

To address the need for specialized skills and knowledge in diagnosing lawn problems, in 2006 horticulture agents Carol O'Meara (Boulder County), Carl Wilson (Denver County) and Colorado State University Extension turf specialist Tony Koski developed *Lawncheck*. The program was developed with a dual purpose: train horticulture agents in research-based diagnostic skills and knowledge, and, create an on-site, fee-for-service lawn diagnosis program that helps county Extension offices cover training and travel costs.

In the program's first two years, Koski and CSU Extension turf and ornamental plant disease specialist Ned Tisserat provided Front Range Extension agents with lectures and labs on grass and weed identification, turf disease, and pest symptoms. Training also included field visits to homeowners associations (HOAs) and urban parks where agents applied and refined what they learned in class. Once armed with diagnostic knowledge and skills, agents can more readily assess turf diseases, pests, brown spots, irrigation problems and other residential lawn-related issues.

In 2007, horticulture agents—with oversight by Koski—began conducting *Lawncheck* site visits in several Front Range counties including Boulder, Denver, Jefferson, and Larimer. Two years later, Colorado Master Gardeners (CMGs) interested in lawn diagnostics were invited to attend trainings and assist with site visits.

During a site visit, horticulture agents—often accompanied by CMG volunteers or Koski—discuss lawn and irrigation problems with the homeowner, evaluate treatment solutions, and provide CSU Extension fact sheets that cover the problems and treatments addressed. The process can take one to two hours.

Each participating county manages its own *Lawncheck* program. Fees vary by county, although most charge \$75, which covers travel expense, agent time, and materials. The program is offered in Arapahoe, Boulder, Denver, Douglas, Jefferson, Larimer and Weld counties, and is expanding. In 2011, 188 *Lawncheck* visits were conducted.



### The Bottom Line

- *Lawncheck* is the only service in Colorado that provides homeowners with unbiased, research-based, on-site turf consultation and diagnostics.
- *Lawncheck* helps customers learn how to adopt sustainable lawn care practices that not only improve the look and health of lawns, but also save money.

### By the Numbers

- Average return on investment for every \$1 put into landscaping: \$1.35<sup>1</sup>
- Annual amount homeowners spend on lawn care in the U.S.: \$6.4 billion
- Amount of water Kentucky bluegrass weekly needs in spring and fall: 1 inch

## Impact

*Lawncheck* is the only program of its kind in Colorado that performs on-site turf consultation and diagnostics that help customers (homeowners, HOAs, businesses and more) learn how to improve their lawn care practices. These might involve: making changes to their watering, mowing and cultural practices; repairing malfunctioning sprinkler systems; selecting different turfgrass species; controlling weeds; decreasing pesticide use; and, many others.

The program has accrued many benefits for the public as well as Extension volunteers, including:

### Improved lawn quality through unbiased, reliable information

- According to Koski, people turn to CSU Extension for *Lawncheck* because they've been told one thing by a lawn service company and want a second opinion. "They really trust us for the right information," Koski says. "We have saved people from making very expensive decisions like re-sodding their lawn, or using a lawn service company, or spraying fungicide—all when they don't need to."
- Clients have reported greener, thicker grass, reduced necrotic ringspot disease, and regrowth of dead and bald spots after overseeding.

### Potential reduction in water and pesticide use

- According to Koski, water management issues, such as overwatering and faulty sprinkler heads, are the most common source of residential lawn problems.
- A large proportion of landscape irrigation water is directed to lawns making them an easy target for criticisms of landscape water waste. The majority of site visits includes recommendations to water more efficiently, use fewer pesticides, and fine-tune the type and amount of fertilizer applied, and its timing. Reduced inputs save money.
- According to Boulder County Extension agent Carol O'Meara, these behavior changes can lower phosphorous run-off into local watersheds and help conserve municipal water supplies.

### Improved Colorado Master Gardener curriculum & confidence

- As a result of increased interest in turf/lawn diagnostics, the overall CMG volunteer training curriculum has been expanded to address symptoms and solutions to residential lawn care problems.
- Experienced CMGs may also participate in advanced plant diagnostic training that extends beyond lawn issues to include disease and pest issues associated with trees, shrubs and other common residential plants.

<sup>1</sup> Figure reported by Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado, as appeared in Journal of Environmental Horticulture (2010).

*"Lawncheck can help homeowners save money, but, perhaps more importantly, it helps them come away with a much better understanding of how to sustainably care for their lawn."*

— Carol O'Meara  
Boulder County Extension horticulture  
and entomology agent

*"The neighbors come to me for advice because I had such dramatic improvement in the appearance of my lawn. As a result, our neighborhood has learned a lot about proper watering and fertilization."*

— *Lawncheck* client

*"I think that confidence has filtered down from agents to our volunteers. As a result, everybody is more confident about diagnosing turf problems."*

— Tony Koski  
CSU Extension turf specialist

## Contact Information

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