

## **Thatch in lawns and when to prune azaleas**

**Q.** I have a good bit of thatch in my lawn. Can I rake or possibly burn it out at the end of this growing season?

**A.** Many times, what people are calling thatch is really not thatch - it's just dead grass blades on the soil surface. True thatch cannot easily be removed. Thatch is a layer of mostly dead grass stems, runners and roots. It is a layer that builds up over time between the sod and soil. This layer may look somewhat like peat moss. Dead leaf blades breakdown too fast to contribute to this thatch layer. A brisk raking will remove many dead grass blades. But in order to remove thatch, you need to use a vertical mower (dethatcher). Or, some people will top dress the lawn to help more quickly breakdown the thatch. This is described in the UF/IFAS Extension publication, "Thatch and Its Control in Florida Lawns," available at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/lh029>. If the thatch layer becomes too thick, it can cause some problems in a lawn, also described in the Extension publication. In addition, the publication explains how to determine if the thatch layer is too thick. Maintaining a lawn at too high of a level is the main cause for a thatch problem - primarily, this means fertilizing too much or using too much nitrogen, watering too much and sometimes overusing fungicides. Basically, it's a matter of growing the grass faster than the microorganisms can breakdown the debris. If what you are dealing with is just grass blades and not true thatch, there's probably no real need to do anything. As far as burning the lawn, many municipalities do not allow burning and there is always the gamble of the fire getting out of control.

**Q.** I have some overgrown azaleas that need some pruning. I've been waiting for cooler weather to get outside and tackle this job. Is now a good time to prune azaleas?

**A.** Removal of a few unusually long branches to improve the plant's appearance is okay now. But the major pruning of azaleas is best done shortly after the flowers begin to fade in late spring. Major pruning after June will interfere with flowering the following spring. Azaleas produce their flower buds during late summer and fall, which open the following spring. You can find the flower buds now tucked away in the leaves at the tip end of the shoots. Pruning azaleas this late in the year will result in fewer flowers in spring.

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