

Fairy Rings

This article was prompted by the sight of fairy rings on the Lord's cricket pitch during the Test Match against the West Indies. The commentators were much exercised by the sight of these green rings in the turf, and there were even a couple of small ones actually on the closely mown wicket. There was quite a lot of inaccurate chat about what causes them, and headlines in the papers such as "Lords pitch infected by fairy rings". So here is the lowdown on fairy rings, hopefully reasonably accurate.



Fairy rings are caused by one of a wide range of fungi, but the most common in the UK on lawns and cultivated turf is *Marasmius oreades*, not unsurprisingly known as the Fairy Ring Champignon. The fungus starts to grow at a single point but soon runs out of nutrients, it therefore spreads outwards from a central point into more fertile areas. As it grows it breaks down detritus in the soil, converting it into nitrogen-rich chemicals, which cause the grass at that point to go bright green. The area behind the spreading fungus becomes depleted of nutrient - the grass therefore looks very sickly and sometimes dies. The overall effect is a spreading circle of bright green with brownish unhealthy grass just inside. The final flourish is often a ring of small brown toadstools which appear in the autumn. These are edible. I tried them once, harvested from a ring on our lawn in our garden near Wisbech - they were OK but nothing to write home about. And you have to be careful - some of the fairy ring-forming toadstools are poisonous.

The shape of fairy rings is often irregular, but in the case of the Lord's pitch, they were very regular circles, probably because of the fine and regular turf. Fairy rings can expand by about 1 foot per year, so the Lord's rings must be several years old - it is a bit of a mystery that they have never been noticed before! They can keep on growing and can reach hundreds of feet in diameter, though the usual lawn varieties do not seem to get that big.

So how can you "cure" fairy rings? Well, you can't! There used to be a noxious range of chemicals which could be used but they are all banned now. There are a number of treatments available to professional green-keepers and groundsmen but none of them are a foolproof cure. You can dig up the grass and replant but you may need to go down about a foot to remove all the mycelia. So if you have one in your lawn just enjoy it, together with all the other autumn fungi around at the moment.

Having said that, I'm not sure I have ever seen a fairy ring on a lawn in Pembrokeshire. However, Peter assures me there are several at Castlemartin, though these may be caused by a different fungus, and there are definitely some in the grasslands at Stackpole Head.

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