

A&M dry grass study could change look of S.A. lawns

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This long dry spell has been tough enough on lawns without denying them the little bit of rain that fell this summer.

But that's exactly what Texas A&M researchers have done to 200 plots of grass on the South Side over the past two months. It's not turf torture, they insist, but a survival-of-the-fittest contest among 25 types of grass to determine which are most capable of enduring a Texas-size drought.

The results could dictate what lawns in the Alamo City - and beyond - will look like for years to come.

The winners will land on San Antonio's list of approved grasses for new homes and businesses starting Jan. 1. And they're likely to show up on similar lists all over the South as other Sunbelt cities look for ways to combat drought, said David Chalmers, an A&M professor and the turfgrass specialist for the Texas Cooperative Extension Service.

"The data won't stay in San Antonio," he said. "Other municipalities and agencies with an interest in water conservation have an interest in which grasses perform well."

Results won't be in for a couple of months, but the study hit a critical point last week when researchers ended a 60-day forced drought on the test plots.

Many of the 25 varieties didn't look like they fared well during the dry period before researchers finally turned on the sprinklers.

Some looked so sickly that researchers decided to change the protocol of future studies, pushing up the first core samples to 20 days.

"They had this suspicion that some of it was going to die and they wanted to know when it died," said Karen Guz, conservation director for SAWS.

The study, sponsored by the Turfgrass Producers of Texas and the San Antonio Water System, involves 25 varieties of grass - seven St. Augustine, eight Bermuda, nine zoysia and one buffalo grass.

Eight identical sets of each were planted - four in deep, native soil and four in soil with a heavy plastic liner placed four inches below ground to mimic the rocky soil conditions on San Antonio's North Side.

None of those in the thin soil seemed to have any green left in them after the drought, but water could perk up those that are just lying dormant.

Much of the grass on the native soil, which had been able to root much deeper, still had green blades among the brown, including some St.

Augustine varieties - a grass often criticized as thirsty and too drought-sensitive.

Chalmers didn't want to talk about specifics, waiting for scientific results, but he said that even 20 days without water was clearly tough on some varieties grown in thin soil.

Researchers enforced the drought with a 5,000-square-foot rail-mounted rain-out shelter that automatically moved over the plots when activated by rain drops. The shelter was almost unnecessary.

Only 0.45 inches fell in the first 50 days of the imposed drought at nearby Stinson Municipal Airport.

To ensure that the study results are scientifically valid for peer-reviewed publication, it's being repeated in the coming year. Researchers were planting sod last Friday for a new plot that will undergo a 60-day drought starting next July.

But Guz said SAWS is not waiting to update its list of approved grasses.

"We have an obligation to people to put out whatever information we have,"

she said. "Because in the next drought, it's unfair to people buying a new house that we had this information but they got a house that maybe doesn't have this drought-tolerant turf and they have to worry about it."

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Online at:

<http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/metro/stories/MYSA092906.01A.grass.35cb362>.