

A BRIEF DISCUSSION OF LAWN CARE

MOWING: Regular mowing *with a sharp mower blade* is the starting point of good lawn maintenance. A sharp blade is necessary to achieve a clean cut. Mowing with a dull blade will result in shredded grass leaf tips. This makes it more difficult for the plant to heal, and also results in discoloration from the shredded tissues as they die back.

Also, keep in mind that the shorter the grass is cut, the shorter the roots will be. Shorter roots require more frequent watering, which not only leads to more water use, but also more thatch accumulation. Cutting lawns too short also results in more open space between individual grass leaves, and open spaces are opportunities for weed seed germination. Usually, the best mowing height for our lawns is around 2-1/2". While this doesn't produce the golf course-like appearance that some desire, it makes for the healthiest home lawn as the grass varieties and maintenance inputs are dissimilar from those of the golf course.

FERTILIZATION & WATERING: The most confusing aspect of lawn maintenance for most of us is in determining whether watering or fertilization is needed to "green up" a weak lawn. Usually more of both is called for, but to determine if more water is needed check soil moisture 3-4" below the surface. For fertilization, if spots where pets have relieved themselves stand out as dark green patches, then your lawn is past due for an application! Basically, fertilize your lawn when the grass color indicates a need, and *after* you have made certain that your watering schedule is adequate.

Concerning watering schedules, there are many variables regarding spacing of sprinkler heads and the specific output of each head; however, there are a few assumptions that will work to start off the season. First, any watering schedule will be more effective with two or more start times (or watering cycles) per watering day. Such a schedule minimizes run-off and maximizes soil penetration. Second, it is far better to water deeply on alternating days than it is to water daily. Three to four times per week is best. Try six to ten minutes per time, twice per night, three nights per week for starters and go up from there.

LIME: Optimum turfgrass performance requires a soil pH of 6.0 – 7.0. Most of our area soils are below 6.0. This means that they are too acidic for optimum utilization of available nutrients. Annual applications of ground limestone will help to raise soil pH values. Warning: Due to a reaction that occurs between lime and fertilizer, separate your applications by at least two weeks.

LAWN CARE (CONTINUED)

THATCH: Each year your sod develops a little more thatch and winter-desiccated grass blades that accumulate if ignored. Constant mowing at the same height does nothing to reduce this accumulation. Eventually, more and more "brown" shows after each summer mowing. Also, as more material accumulates, more water is required to penetrate into the root zone.

Begin each new spring season by "scalp" mowing your lawns (usually an inch below normal mowing height). This activity may temporarily strip the "green" from your lawn, and requires extra effort, but it results in a substantially rejuvenated lawn.

AERATION: Air (oxygen) is the most important component of soil for healthy roots. Our local clay soils are especially prone to saturation and compaction, leaving little pore space for air. Core aeration works to improve the oxygen component of the topsoil.

Of equal importance, a well-oxygenated topsoil supports a thriving population of beneficial bacteria and other microorganisms. These are essential for organic nutrient cycling and the breakdown of thatch.

WEED GRASSES: Grassy weeds (annual bluegrass, velvet grass & bentgrass are most common) are a fact of life. They find their way into every lawn over time, and they are difficult-to-impossible to eliminate. The best way to minimize all weeds is simply to keep a thick, healthy turf that won't give weed seeds many opportunities to germinate. Herbicides that will knock out weed grasses will also kill lawn grasses. Therefore, complete renovation is the only answer for you if you are determined to temporarily rid your lawn of this group of invaders.

BROADLEAF WEEDS: Broadleaf weeds, on the other hand (clover, dandelions, etc.) are relatively easy to control. Just be sure to follow mixing and application instructions carefully as too much herbicide can weaken and even kill grass as well as the intended weeds. Also, apply only spot treatment to the actual weeds (NO "WEED & FEED"). Broadcast treatments put unnecessary amounts of herbicides in your yard and can cause root problems with desirable ornamentals.

MOSS: Many common environmental factors contribute to the spread of lawn moss. Acidic soil pH, shade, soil compaction and water saturation all work against healthy lawns, thereby favoring moss. Control moss by applying iron sulfate (granular or liquid) in the spring. Follow this with removal (raking) of the dead moss, and then with overseeding to maintain a thick stand of grass. In very shady areas this will be necessary annually. Keep in mind that moss thrives in winter and substantially fades away in summer. Warning: Iron products will stain pavement!