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Lawn Care Guide Gardening Know-How

Family Circle Articles

Part I: Grow a Healthy Green Lawn All Summer Long

By Al Ubell & Label Shulman

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Most proud property owners want their lawns to look just as green and lush as their neighbors'. To help you cultivate a healthy green lawn without breaking your back, we consulted lawn-care experts. They let us in on some unusual tricks of the trade and provided us with a fail proof maintenance program that should make your lawn-tending days easier and more rewarding.

Every landscaping pro emphasized that a well-cultivated lawn is the end product of several decisions and activities relating to specific soil and climate conditions. These include:

- testing your soil to determine its contents and chemistry.
- proper preparation of the soil before seeding.
- choosing the right grass (or grasses) for your particular soil conditions and climate.
- applying fertilizers in the right combination and amounts and applied at the proper times.
- appropriate and adequate watering.
- regular mowing at prescribed heights.
- using insect and weed controls, when necessary.



Testing Your Soil

This is one of the most important steps you must take to achieve a beautiful lawn. You can test the soil yourself using kits, which are sold in most garden-supply stores. Or, you can use the soil-testing services of your County Extension Service or a local college's Agricultural Extension Division. (Consult your telephone directory.) Both organizations usually charge a nominal fee. Local, private soil-testing services may also be helpful.

Having your soil tested and analyzed takes the guesswork out of deciding what kind of fertilizers and minerals you need to add in order to make the soil receptive to grass growing. Since most lawns contain one or two different soil types, you should take two samples from your property (as far apart from each other as you can). Dig down about 6 inches and remove about a pint of dry soil for each sample. Store the soil in a plastic bag or container and deliver it to the soil-testing service.

Preparing Your Soil

Turn over, rake and break up the soil as deeply as possible. Most lawn-care and seed firms recommend raking 3? or 4? inches deep if you're just upgrading or patching your lawn. However, if you are sodding and seeding, dig down around 12? inches. Add the appropriate fertilizers and any other minerals and organic matter, such as manure, compost, sawdust, peat moss or shredded ground bark. Most soil also requires a certain amount of lime and/or soil sulfur to bring the soil to the right alkaline or acid levels. Careful soil preparation encourages good grass growth and increases resistance to insects and lawn disease.

After grading (leveling) and smoothing the lawn bed, add a starter fertilizer that is high in phosphorus. See package for a middle number (24-4-8) indicating phosphorus content from 3% to 5%. Check fertilizer package for proper amount and application directions. After fertilizing, it's best to wait a month before seeding. Water the soil as if you had already seeded;

weeds start to grow, eliminate them with a contact herbicide, available at any local garden supply store. Allow the soil to dry thoroughly for three or four days before applying grass seed or sod.

Seed Selection

If you are uncertain what kind of grass you would prefer, take a drive (or a healthy walk) around your neighborhood. When you find a lawn you like, ask the owners what type of grass it is. Then consult our "Lawn-Care Weather Zones" map and "Which Grass Is Best for Your Lawn?" chart (see page 66). They will help you decide on the perfect grass seed for your needs. But before buying any seed, answer the following questions:

- How green a lawn do you want?
- How durable? Is your lawn just for looks or for play?
- Is your lawn area predominantly sunny or shady?
- How much time and effort are you willing to invest in lawn care?

After you've decided on the proper type grass for your needs, purchase a quality-grade seed, but buy a bit more than you need (this extra seed will come in handy for future spot-seeding). A few extra dollars spent on quality seed will save you hundreds of dollars later on, since you'll have fewer problems.

When shopping for grass seed or sod, remember that no single variety is perfect. Our lawn experts recommend mixing two or three types of seed, depending upon the climate and the soil conditions where you live. You also may notice that your gardening supply center sells pre-blended packages of grass seed. The idea is to have the strengths of one variety compensate for the weaknesses of another, resulting in a grass cover that is good for all seasons. Special Tip: Check the weed content of the grass seed before you buy. The lower the percent of weed content, the better. Under one-half of one percent (.05%) is best.

Applying the Seed

- Grade and rake the soil thoroughly.
- Remove all surface stones.
- Level soil and rake smooth.
- Sow the seed. (Hand seeding works well for a small area, but a seed spreader allows a more even distribution, since it can be adjusted to drop the seed at recommended rates.)
- Divide the seed into two equal parts. Apply seed in one direction first, then seed with the second batch at right angles to the first, making sure to cover your entire lawn area.
- Lightly rake the area to coax some of the seed underground for better contact with the soil.
- Rent (or borrow) a lawn roller, and roll over the entire seeded area. This presses the seed further into the soil.
- Water the lawn thoroughly and gently so that the water soaks through the surface. Water two or three times every day with a fine mist spray to keep the lawn's surface from drying out. (Caution: Do not drown your lawn with too much water. This will just wash away the seeds!)
- When young shoots of grass emerge, reduce watering to once a day for a longer period of time. Keep soil damp to promote hardier, healthier grass.

Watering Do's & Don'ts

Because soil conditions, drainage, climate and frequency of rain vary greatly, there is no absolute rule, but landscaping experts say your best bet is to water thoroughly until the lawn is moist to a depth of 6" to 8" inches. (Test with a screwdriver pushed into the soil.) In most cases, watering for two hours will properly soak an area of 1,000 square feet. Watering deeply less frequently is better than frequent shallow watering.

Water lawn again when soil begins to dry out. Use this test to see if it's time to rewater: Step on the grass. If it doesn't spring back, it's probably time to water. Another, more subtle way to determine if the lawn needs watering is when you begin to notice the grass color changing from bright green to a duller blue-green.

Some experimentation will be necessary until you establish the appropriate routine for watering your lawn. During a hot spell,

more frequent watering will be necessary. During a rainy period, less watering will be needed. (You might even want to shut off your sprinkler system, if you have one, to conserve water.) Contrary to popular belief, there is no best time of day to water a lawn. The only caution you should observe is not to water during the middle of a bright, sunny, hot day.

Fertilizer Facts

Select fertilizer based on the type of grass you have, the soil conditions and the climate where you live. In general, nitrogen is the most important fertilizer for established lawns. Phosphorus and potassium are less important. The best time to fertilize warm-season grasses (grasses that grow better in warm weather zones, such as the sunbelt states) is late spring. While spring, late summer and early fall are best for cool season grasses. There are basically two types of fertilizers fast-release and slow-release. Use each according to the manufacturer's instructions. Special and sparing use should be made of fast-release fertilizers, since they have a tendency to "burn" grass blades and cause discoloration.

Mowing Tips

In most instances, lawn height should be kept between 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ and 3 inches. But keep in mind that you should never cut off more than half the height of the blades of grass. Mowing about once a week during the growing season helps promote grass growth. Keep your lawnmower blades sharp to prevent the grass from being "pulled out" instead of being cut. Don't let the grass grow too high before cutting; this can result in damage to the grass blade stalks and debilitate the lawn.

If you mow frequently, you can allow the grass clippings to remain on the lawn with no damage to the grass. In fact, it helps to return nutrients to the soil that have been absorbed by growing grass. However, heavy grass clippings can suffocate grass, so they should be removed.

Insect And Disease Control

Problems caused by insects or disease are, fortunately, not all that frequent. An unattractive lawn may be caused by conditions other than insects or disease. Before you assume these more serious problems, though, check the following list for possible causes of grass problems and take steps to correct them:

- misuse of fertilizers-usually applying too much.
- under or overwatering.
- chemical spills (gasoline, oil, etc.).
- animals digging or urinating.
- chlorine spills from a swimming pool.
- too heavy wear-and-tear for your type of grass seed.
- poor mowing practices.

If you still think your lawn has bug problems or a disease, consult your local Cooperative Extension Service, <http://npic.orst.edu/countyext.htm>, or College Agricultural Extension Division. Your local garden center can also help, since they will be familiar with the problems typical in your area.

How To Handle Watering Restrictions And Drought Conditions

Water shortages are a problem where you live, you can still take some steps to maintain a reasonable-looking lawn. The key word is "adapt."

- Seed or overseed with grasses that require less water, such as fine and tall fescues.
- Adjust your lawnmower to a higher setting (3 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 inches), since longer blades help retain the available moisture.
- Fertilize your lawn regularly twice a year to promote deep root growth, following manufacturer's instructions carefully.
- Water deeply when you are permitted (soaking soil 8 to 12 inches deep). This also promotes deep root growth.
- Water lawn during cool parts of the day to minimize evaporation.

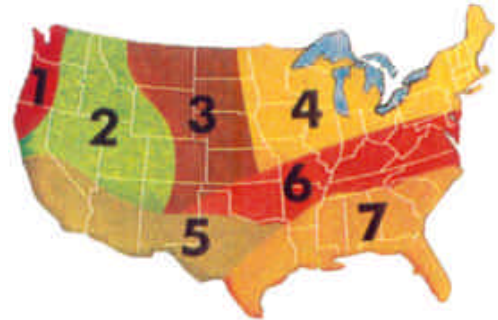
- Control weeds, since they eat up water, too.

Grasses & Climate Zones

The kind of care and type of grass your lawn needs depends on where you live. Locate your weather zone number on the color coded map and use it to choose the ideal grass seed for your area.

Grass Types (United States)

- **Bahiagrass** {zone: 7}
- **Beachgrass*** {zone: 1, 4, 6, 7}
- **Bermudagrass** {zone: 5, 7}
- **Bluegrass** {zone: 1, 4, 5}
- **Blue Gammagrass** {zone: 5}
- **Buffalograss** {zone: 3, 5}
- **Improved Bermudagrass** {zone: 5, 7}
- **Centipedegrass** {zone: 7}
- **Chewing Fescue** {zone: 1, 2}
- **Creeping Bentgrass** {zone: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6}
- **Dichondra** {zone: 5}
- **Red Fescue, Creeping Red Fescue** {zone: 1, 2, 4}
- **Tall Fescue** {zone: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6}
- **Common Kentucky Bluegrass** {zone: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6}
- **Improved Kentucky Bluegrass** {zone: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6}
- **Annual Ryegrass** {zone: 1, 3, 4, 6, 7}
- **Turf-Type Perennial Ryegrass** {zone: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6}
- **St. Augustine* *** {zone: 5, 7}
- **Wheatgrass** {zone: 2, 3, 5}
- **Zoysiagrass*** {zone: 5, 6, 7}



Grass Characteristics

Bahiagrass

Germination Period: 21-28 days.

Dark green color (turns brown in cold weather). Hairy coarse characteristics. Requires moist conditions and acid soil. Grows in sun and light shade. Warm climate. Good for general utility. Excellent for play areas.

Beachgrass

*Germination Period: **

Light green color. Thick coarse characteristics. Requires good drainage and alkaline soil. Grows in full sun. Grows in cool temperatures. Good for general utility, slopes and terraces.

Bermudagrass

Germination Period: 4-12 days.

Dark green color (turns brown in cold weather). Fine and thick characteristics. Requires moist earth, acid soil conditions. Grows in sun and warm temperatures. Excellent for general utility, play areas, slopes and terraces.

Bluegrass

Germination Period: 6-30 days.

Green color (turns brown in hot weather). Fine and thick characteristics. Requires good drainage, dry earth, acid soil. Grows in full sun and cool temperate weather. Excellent for general utility, good for play areas, slopes and terraces.

Blue Gammagrass

Germination Period: 15-30 days.

Gray Green (turns brown in hot weather). Hairy characteristics. Requires dry conditions and alkaline soil. Grows in full sun and cool temperate weather. Use for general utility, play areas, slopes and terraces.

Buffalograss

Germination Period: 25-35 days.

Gray Green (turns brown in hot weather). Fine, hairy characteristics. Dry conditions and alkaline soil. Grows in sun and cool temperate weather. Good for play areas and quick cover. Excellent for slopes and terraces.

Improved Bermudagrass

Germination Period: 10-20 days.

Green color. Fine, thick characteristics. Requires dry conditions, acid soil. Grows in full sun and warm temperatures. Excellent for general utility and play areas. Good for quick cover, slopes, and terraces.

Centipedegrass

Germination Period: 14-20 days.

Light green color. Thick coarse characteristics. Requires moist conditions and acid soil. Grows in sun and light shade and warm temperatures. Good for slopes and terraces.

Chewing Fescue

Germination Period: 5-12 days.

Dark Green, green color. Fine characteristics. Requires good drainage and acid soil. Grows in full sun, light shade and shade amid cool temperatures. Excellent for general utility. Good for quick cover, slopes and terraces.

Creeping Bentgrass

Germination Period: 7-14 days.

Green color. Fine, thick characteristics. Requires good drainage and acid soil. Grows in sun and light shade and cool temperatures. Good for utility, quick cover, slopes and terraces. Excellent for play areas.

Dichondra

Germination Period: 14-24 days.

Green, light green color. Thick characteristics. Requires moist earth. Thrives in acid and alkaline soils. Grows in sun, light shade and shady conditions within warm temperatures. Good for general utility.

Red Fescue, Creeping Red Fescue

Germination Period: 10-21 days.

Dark green color. Fine, thick features. Requires good drainage, dry earth. Requires acid soil. Grows in sun, light shade and shady conditions within cool temperatures. Good for utility, quick cover, slopes and terraces. Excellent for play areas.

Tall Fescue

Germination Period: 10-14 days.

Dark green, green color. Thick coarse characteristics. Requires good drainage and acid soil. Grows in full sun and light shade within cool temperate climates. Good for quick cover. Excellent for play areas, slopes and terraces.

Common Kentucky Bluegrass

Germination Period: 14-28 days.

Dark green color. Fine thick characteristics. Requires good drainage and acid soil. Grows in sun within cool climates. Good for play areas, quick cover, sloped, and terraces. Excellent for general utility.

Improved Kentucky Bluegrass

Germination Period: 14-28 days.

Dark green color. Fine thick characteristics. Requires good drainage, moist earth and acid soil. Grows in full sun, light shade within cool climates. Good for play areas, quick cover, sloped, and terraces. Excellent for general utility.

Annual Ryegrass

Germination Period: 3-7 days.

Green color. Coarse characteristics. Requires moist earth and acid soil. Grows in full sun, light shade within cool climates. Good for play areas. Excellent for quick cover.

Turf-Type Perennial Ryegrass

Germination Period: 3-7 days.

Dark green, green color. Fine, thick characteristics. Requires good drainage, moist earth and acid soil. Grows in full sun, light shade within cool climates. Good for play areas, slopes and terraces. Excellent for general utility and quick cover.

St. Augustine

*Germination Period: **

Blue green color. Thick coarse characteristics. Requires moist earth and acid soil. Grows in full sun, light shade and shade within warm climates. Good for slopes and terraces.

Wheat Grass

Germination Period: 14-30 days.

Blue green color. Hairy characteristics. Requires dry earth and alkaline soil. Grows in sun and cool climates. Good for general utility, play areas, slopes and terraces.

Zoysiagrass

*Germination Period: *.*

Dark green, gray green color (turns brown in cold weather). Fine characteristics. Requires good drainage and acid soil. Grows in full sun, light shade and shade within warm climates. Good for play areas, slopes and terraces. Excellent for general utility.

Lawn Pest Control

When caring for your lawn, read and follow all safety precautions for using fertilizers and pest control methods.

Consider environmentally friendly (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods for pest-control. For more information on safe and effective methods for controlling garden pests, review the links provided below:

Lawn Insect Management Resources

Alternative insect control methods:

- <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7476.html>

Identify garden pests:

- <http://www.nysaes.cornell.edu/ent/factsheets/pests.html>

Pesticide alternatives:

- <http://www.nycwasteless.org/gov/vendors.html#pesticide>

Find a local collection site for pesticide disposal:

- <http://www.earth911.org/>

Pesticide factsheets:

- <http://www.pesticide.org/factsheets.html>

Seasonal Lawn Maintenance Guide

Select the appropriate lawn care maintenance table according to your climate zone. Review climate [zone map](#).

Seasonal Lawn Care Guide: Zones 1, 2, 3

Seasonal Guidelines

Early Spring

Remove dead grass in lawn (dethatch). Plant cool season grasses. Cut grass to 2 1/2" or less. Treat with alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds. Additional seeding, if required. Fertilize.

Late Spring

Treat again with alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds, if needed. Fertilize again.

Summer

Cut grass 2 1/2" to 3" high to prevent drying and burning. Treat again with alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds if needed. Water infrequently but generously. (See "[Watering Do's & Don'ts](#)").

Fall

Fertilize for the last time before winter. Treat with alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds, if needed. Treat for snow mold, if present last spring. Mow lawn until it stops growing. Reseed bald spots.

Winter

Last mowing before it snows (mid-late November). Snow mold treatment with alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds, if needed.

Seasonal Lawn Care Guide: Zones 4, 6

Seasonal Guidelines

Early Spring

Remove dead grass in lawn (dethatch). Repair lawn using seed, sod, patches or plugs. Treat using alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds. Use environmentally friendly pest control methods to reduce damages caused by grubs.

Late Spring

Seasonal Guidelines

Fertilize zoysia grass and Bermudagrass as it turns green. Repair lawn using seed, sod and patches. Cut grass to 2" or less.

Summer

Cut grass 2 1/2" to 3" high to prevent drying and burning. Treat again with alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds, if needed. Water infrequently but generously. (See "[Watering Do's & Don'ts](#)").

Fall

Fertilize for the last time before winter. Use alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds if needed. Treat for snow mold, if present last spring. Mow lawn until it stops growing. Reseed bald spots.

Winter

If snow is not covering lawn, treat any presence of snow mold using an alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment method.

Seasonal Lawn Care Guide: Zones 5

Seasonal Guidelines

Early Spring

Warm-season grass should be fertilized at germination. Additional seeding, if required. Treat with alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds. Cut grass to 2 1/2" or less.

Late Spring

Bermudagrass should be planted. Treat again using alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds, if needed.

Summer

Cut grass 2 1/2" to 3" high to prevent drying and burning. Treat again with alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds, if needed. Water generously but don't over do it. (See "[Watering Do's & Don'ts](#)").

Fall

Fertilize for the last time before winter. Treat with use alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds. if needed. Reseed bald spots.

Winter

Reseed with cool-season grasses. Control weeds using alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds. Remove dead grass in lawn (dethatch}. Fertilize at end of winter.

Seasonal Lawn Care Guide: Zones 6, 7

Seasonal Guidelines

Early Spring

Repair winter damaged lawn using seed, sod, patches or plugs. Fertilize with nitrogen. Treat with alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds. Cut grass to 2 1/2" or less.

Late Spring

Remove dead grass in lawn (dethatch). Fertilize warm-season grasses (except centipedegrass). Treat again with alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds, if needed.

Summer

Cut grass 2" to 3" high to prevent drying and burning. Treat again with alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds, if needed. Water infrequently but generously; don't overdo it. (See "[Watering Do's & Don'ts](#)").

Fall

Fertilize for the last time before winter. Treat with use alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds, if needed. Reseed bald spots.

Winter

Use alternative (non-chemical) lawn treatment methods to control weeds. Fertilize. Control grubs using pest controls that are environmentally friendly.

