10-Minute University™
Oregon Master Gardener™ Association – Clackamas County Chapter
In Cooperation with Oregon State University Extension Service

Lawn Care

Introduction

Understanding how home lawns naturally evolve is key to having a good-looking lawn while minimizing labor and chemical use. To start, the home gardener needs to accept one reality -- new lawns seeded with grass, often perennial ryegrass and fine fescue, will gradually and naturally shift toward bentgrasses and annual bluegrasses. This process is the inevitable result of seeds carried in by wind or those already present in your soil "seed bank" when the lawn was installed. The end product, a "climax lawn", is perfectly adapted to your site. If the home gardener follows care instructions in this handout, a climax lawn can look lush, healthy and inviting.

Mowing

Mowing is central to managing the home lawn. Proper mowing requires setting the mower at the correct height and mowing at the recommended frequency: Mow high, and mow often!

- Frequency -- Mow at-least weekly March through October and once a month the rest of the year.
- Mowing height - Set the mowing height according to the dominant type of turf grass: 1-1.5" for colonial bent grass; 1.5-2.5" for fine fescue, perennial rye and Kentucky blue; 2-3" for tall fescue. If you are not sure what you have, set the mowing height to 2".
- Grass clippings – Use a mulching mower to return clippings to the lawn. This reduces the need for added nitrogen fertilizer. Ideally, clippings should form a finely-cut, light covering. Clumping, wet clippings should be broken up and mowed a second time or raked up and deposited into the compost bin.
- Mower blades – Keep them sharp so grass is cut clean and not torn.
- Compaction – Foot traffic and mower wheels compact soil. Change mowing pattern to lessen impact.

Fertilizing

A healthy lawn needs to be fed preferably twice a year. Fertilizer improves vigor and health of the turf grass so they can outcompete weeds.

- Needs by type of grass – Perennial ryegrass has the highest need for nitrogen; tall fescue is intermediate; and fine fescues and bentgrasses do well at low levels of nitrogen.
- Frequency – The type of dominant turf grass determines frequency; perennial rye needs 2 to 4 applications of nitrogen per year, tall fescue and fine fescue need 1 to 3 applications per year, and climax lawn should be fertilized 0 to 2 applications per year.
- Timing – If you fertilize twice a year, do so in mid-May and then in mid-September to mid-October. If you want consistently high quality green turf, you should fertilize in April, May-June, August-September, and then continue into winter, once in October and once in December.
- Types of fertilizer – Water-soluble types give immediate results while slow release forms act over time. Apply water-soluble forms at low rate and repeat often; what is not immediately absorbed by plants or soil microbes will be lost. If you want an organic lawn fertilizer, feather meal or corn gluten meal are effective sources of nitrogen.
- Fertilizer content (N-P-K) – Lawn fertilizers should be high in nitrogen (N) and low in phosphorus (P) and potassium (K). In our area, P and K tend not to be deficient so, unless a soil analysis indicates a need, add nitrogen only.

- How much – For lush, green turf, add 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet; for thin, yellowing turf, add 1.5 to 2 pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. For example, if you use a fertilizer that is 20% nitrogen (e.g., 20-x-y labeled on the package), you will apply 5 pounds for 1,000 square feet of healthy lawn. On a weak lawn, you will apply 7.5 to 10 pounds.

Watering

Your soil type determines the quantity and frequency of watering. Therefore, clay soil needs shorter, more frequent sessions to wet the root zone while avoiding run-off. Evaporation is another major factor affecting watering: Water more when the weather is hot.

- Seasonal variations – Because home irrigation supplements rain, irrigation needs change with precipitation. Turn off your irrigation system during the winter.
- How much per week – During a dry summer in the Willamette Valley, lawns should get 1" added water weekly. During spring and fall, the need for irrigation reduces to about 50% of summer.
- How often – The hallmark of a successful watering session is a thoroughly wet root zone. It is difficult to determine whether you should deliver the 1" water over many days or in one day. Experiment with frequency and use empty tuna cans or rain gauge to measure quantity. Try two times a week, each session delivering ½" of water. Then try four times a week, each time ¼". Overtime, you will learn what works best for your lawn.
- Tips – After a watering session, check the result by driving a screwdriver into the turf to verify water penetration. Set the watering device to deliver water at a rate that does not cause run-off. Water early in the day to minimize loss to evaporation.
- Water conservation – You can let the lawn go brown during the summer; most turf grass will survive and green up again with the arrival of fall rain. Persistent drought can kill shallow roots and subject the turf to weed invasion. A thorough watering session once a month will minimize root damage and speed up recovery in fall.

Weeding

If you have weeds in the lawn, remove them by hand or spot apply broadleaf herbicides. Fill in any bare spot with some compost and over seed. This approach saves time, money, and minimizes unnecessary use of chemicals.

Dethatching

Thatch is a tight layer of grass stems and roots, some living and some dead, that form between the soil surface and green blades. Thatch should be removed with a steel hand rake when turf is just beginning vigorous growth in the spring. Left alone, grass roots will grow in this thick layer of thatch, which dries out quicker than soil, and induces drought stress in your lawn.

Additional information

The following are just a few of the many available resources:

OSU Publications available online at *http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog*

Turfgrass Seeding Recommendations for the Pacific Northwest PNW299
Maintaining a Healthy Lawn in Western Oregon EC1521
Practical Lawn Establishment and Renovation EC1550

Master Gardener™ advice

- Call Home Horticulture Helpline: 503-655-8631 (Clackamas County), 503-821-1150 (Washington County), or 503-445-4608 (Multnomah County).
- For 10-Minute University™ handouts and class schedule, visit www.cmastergardeners.org.