

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. Lawns allowed to become dormant during the summer do not need regular mowing.
- 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 2 to 4 times 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 2 applications per year.
- Timing – If you fertilize twice a year, do so once in mid-May and then again sometime between mid-September to mid-October. If you fertilize 4 times annually make the first applications in April, the second application sometime in May-June, the third application sometime in August-September, and the final application in October.
- 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 tends not to be deficient so, unless a soil analysis indicates a need, add products containing N and K only.
- When purchasing a fertilizer look for products with an equal proportion of water soluble (quick release) and water insoluble (slow release) sources of N, which will be noted on the fertilizer content label.
- Water-soluble proportions of N give immediate results, while slow release forms act over time. Therefore, products containing both of these nitrogen sources will provide a relatively even growth.
- If you choose to apply purely water-soluble N sources, such as urea and ammonium nitrate, apply at low rates (0.5 pounds N per 1,000 square feet) 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; organic fertilizers are examples of slow release products.

- Apply fertilizer at 0.5 to 1.5 pounds of N per 1,000 square feet, depending on turf health. Lush lawns can do with the low end while thin, yellowing turf should receive the high end.
- Adjust fertilizer rates according to the labeled N concentration. For examples if the fertilizer is 20% nitrogen (e.g., 20-x-y labeled on the package), you will apply 5 pounds of the fertilizer to get 1 pound of N.

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 to 1 ½” added water weekly.
- How often – In the spring/early summer when temperatures are still moderate and evaporation is minimal apply ¼” two to three times a week (equating to ½ to ¾ inch per week). Add irrigation days or events as temperatures and the demand for water increase. Use empty tuna cans or rain gauges to measure irrigation depth, targeting ¼” per event.
- Tips – Between irrigation events, check the moisture content by inserting a screwdriver into the turf; if the soil is hard and dry add more irrigation events to your program. 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

Be vigilant with removing large weeds with tap roots, such as dandelions, and consider tolerating small ones such as clover and English daisy. 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, if seed is not applied these spots will only become weeds again. 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

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

Turfgrass Seeding Recommendations for the Pacific Northwest PNW299

Practical Lawn Care for Western Oregon EC1521

Practical Lawn Establishment and Renovation EC1550

Retail Lawn Seed Mixtures for Western Oregon and Western Washington EM9100

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.

Oregon State University Extension Service offers educational programs, activities, and materials without discrimination based on age, color, disability, gender identity or expression, genetic information, marital status, national origin, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran's status. Oregon State University Extension Service is an Equal Opportunity Employer.