

Spring lawn care tips from the pros

Ahh, spring! The air is warm, the sun is shining, and your lawn doesn't look as bad as you would have imagined, given the severity of the past winter. What should you do right now to ensure a beautiful, healthy lawn this year?

First, don't let your neighbors, the media, and your own desire to have a spectacular landscape pressure you into doing things that are bad for your grass. Instead, follow these simple ABC's on spring lawn care.

Know the lifecycle of your grass

The first six weeks of spring is when 60% of the top growth is going to occur. Think of those first flushes of grass growth that are always so lush, so green. Now think about this in terms of water, fertilization, and mowing. Surprising to many people, spring is NOT the time to fertilize the lawn. That chore should have been done last fall!

Why don't you fertilize now? Simply said, you will push top growth at the expense of establishing a strong root system. Healthy turf has a deep root system--it is



A well-maintained lawn.

Photo courtesy of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Nassau County

Glossary

Dormant seeding: Grass seed that is sown while the turf is dormant and temperatures are too cool to allow for germination.

helpful survival mechanism for summer droughts that are sure to come our way. Additionally, succulent, lush top growth combined with spring rain means thin skinned grass that will be more easily invaded by disease.

The time to fertilize is in late May.

Know when it's time to mow

Before you mow, understand how your grass grows. Your grass grows from two main points: from the crown, just above the soil surface, and from the base of blades whose tips you have cut. In this way the grass makes new blades and elongates old ones.

When you remove more than one third of that blade you are doing two things:

- ❖ Removing all the food.
- ❖ Stimulating the plant to make more tissue that needs food.

Since this means that what little food that remains preferentially goes to new growth, your roots are going to starve and die. Starved, dying roots are short thirsty roots going into summer.

The shorter you cut your grass, the shorter your roots are. So before you cut your grass for the first time in the spring, change the height of cut on your mower blade so that the grass is cut at 3"---this means give your grass a hair cut when it is 4 inches tall.

continued on next page ►

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Know when to water

Spring rains may supply the necessary water to support your lawn's water needs. Don't be too hasty to turn on the irrigation system or the sprinkler. It's best to invest in a rain gauge to determine rainfall or irrigation amounts.



Don't be too hasty to turn on the sprinkler.

Most lawns will benefit from an inch to an inch and a half of water every 7-10 days. Of course there are exceptions, including variations in soil and weather conditions, sun versus shade, and type of grasses in your lawn. If water restrictions exist in your area, be sure to follow them to avoid fines.

Sharpen your mower blade



A sharp mower blade helps keep your lawn healthy.

Cutting the grass with a dull blade shreds the leaf tip and causes water loss as well as increased susceptibility to disease. In addition, the shredded tips give the lawn a brownish cast, instead of healthy green. While your blade is out being sharpened,

remove the bagger on the back of your mower and let your clippings roam free.

With your new mowing strategy, your clippings are no longer going to be more than about an inch. They will sift into the canopy and add back valuable organic matter, which will improve the overall health and ability of your grass to root.

Worried about thatch? Adding clippings back actually helps to reduce thatch, since the organic matter boosts the rate of thatch breakdown. And by the way, raking does nothing for thatch. The material you remove by raking is above the ground, and is therefore not true thatch. Much better to amend the soil than to think you are removing "thatch" by mechanical means!

Know when to apply lawn care products

Some lawn care products may be unnecessary or are only temporary measures. For instance, weeds are a symptom that something is wrong with the site. Each weed has a message for those able and willing to speak "weed", e.g., plantain means compaction; red sorrel means acid, damp soil.

Identify what weeds you have, learn what they mean, and then take steps to change the site so they don't pay a return visit and the grass will be happy to grow there. One spring weed that needs your attention is crabgrass. If you've had crabgrass in your lawn last year, chances are very good that it will be back! This annual weed makes its presence known when the soil temperatures



Crabgrass requires prompt attention.

Photo courtesy Cornell Cooperative Extension of Nassau County

continued on next page ►

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reach 55 degrees; allowing for seed to germinate.

A helpful timing hint: Crabgrass generally germinates when the forsythia is in full bloom. Chemical controls are either pre or post-emergence. Read the label first and be certain to follow all label directions for application!

Know and practice “Integrated Pest Management” or “IPM”

IPM is a common sense approach to pest control and plant care. It uses a number of measures to prevent, control or reduce plant problems. These include:

- ❖ Use of resistant plant varieties.
- ❖ Proper plant selection and placement.
- ❖ Good aftercare.
- ❖ Use of biological or mechanical controls.
- ❖ Pesticides are typically used as a last resort; although an important tool in the IPM tool kit.

When selecting a pesticide, pick one that is least toxic, consider humans, pets and natural predators. Make the application when it will be most effective in preventing, controlling or reducing the problem; as the saying goes “timing is everything.” Accurate diagnosis of a problem is key when determining what control measures to employ. Bring a representative sample of the problem to your local Cooperative Extension office or garden center.

Know your soil pH

Before you put down lime on your lawn in the spring you need to know if your lawn needs lime and if so,

how much. The only way to figure this out is to have a soil test done. The pH level of your soil can't be seen, tasted, smelled, or “felt”---the only way is better liming through chemistry, and that means a soil test! The pH of your landscape may vary from your front yard to your backyard, so it's best to get a representative sample from each area you want tested. How do you prepare a sample for testing?

- ❖ Dig down 4-6 inches into the soil and take a small core of soil, do this in several areas for your front lawn.
- ❖ Combine the samples together for a composite sample of that area.
- ❖ Repeat the procedure for each area you want tested. It's best to test dry soil, so allow the sample to “dry” for a day or two before testing or submitting a sample for testing.
- ❖ Check with your local garden center or Cooperative Extension office to see if they offer soil testing.



Anyone can use a soil test kit.

continued on next page ►

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Here's a helpful hint: It's important to know the plant(s) you are growing or want to grow when submitting a soil sample for pH testing. Every plant has a 'preferred pH'; be certain to tell the “tester” or testing company what plant(s) you are growing!

Know when to renovate

Spring is not the time! When you remove or disturb lawn areas in the spring, you are encouraging weeds to occupy the nice warm space at the soil's surface that you just opened up. At this time of the year, the growth of the weed is going to out compete the grass. Those weeds that mature will drop more seeds to replenish the bank as well.

If you have existing bare spots at the end of winter you can dormant-seed those spots. If spring beats you to the punch, reseed small bare patches as soon as possible. However, the best time for any major renovation (meaning reseeding more than 50% of the bare spots) is late summer and early fall when less weed competition and autumn rains will give a little push from Mother Nature.



Reseed small bare patches as soon as possible.

Shopping List/Notes

A large yellow rectangular area with horizontal lines for writing, intended for a shopping list or notes.

This Pocket Garden Guide was produced by PlantAmerica Horticulturist Donna Moramarco, and Cornell Cooperative Extension of Nassau County.