

Earth-Friendly Lawn Care

THROUGHOUT THE YEAR



As we're all increasingly concerned that our gardening practices might harm the environment, lawns are coming under attack. But the good news is that not only is it possible to have a good-looking lawn without harming the environment; it's actually less work than conventional, potentially harmful lawn care practices. Just follow this schedule and see your lawn flourish — without harming Mother Earth.

Late Winter/Spring

Preventing Weeds:

If your lawn is sunny and has a history of crabgrass, you can prevent crabgrass by applying corn gluten meal at the recommended rate of 20 pounds per 1,000 square feet. Any less than that won't be effective as a pre-emergent weedkiller, though the Nitrogen in corn gluten WILL help feed your lawn. (It's 9 percent Nitrogen.) We recommend the *Espoma® Organic Weed Preventer*. Apply it when the forsythia are blooming. Remember to always read and follow the instructions. Don't sow grass seed within 10 weeks after applying corn gluten, or it'll prevent the grass seed from germinating. And since it'll be almost too late to plant seeds by then, you may want to wait until fall to plant grass seed - it's the ideal time.

Seeding Bare Spots and Overseeding Thin Lawns:

Although fall is the best time to seed a lawn, bare spots can be seeded and thin lawns can be overseeded in March or April (although if you applied corn gluten you'll have to wait 10 weeks to plant). Remove thatch and debris from the area to be seeded with a steel rake, disturbing the soil to ensure good contact with the grass seed, and apply seed at the recommended rate. Cover the seed with 1/8" layer of *Leafgro®* or cover with *GreenView® Seed Accelerator*, which helps to retain moisture and contain fertilizer. For more information, pick up our brochure for full instructions about overseeding and repairing bare spots.

Overseeding with Clover:

Spring IS the best time to plant clover, which eco-savvy gardeners are discovering the benefits of, despite it being branded as a weed for the last 50 years (ever since a new lawn weedkiller, 2,4-D, had the unfortunate side effect of killing clover). Before that, clover had been

deliberately added to lawn mixes because of its great qualities - especially its ability to self-fertilize, and its resistance to drought. And with our pollinators under attack these days, we appreciate that clover feeds them (unless family members are highly allergic to bee stings, that is).

In March (before your lawn starts to grow when it warms up), mow short, then use a hard garden rake to remove thatch and debris and ensure good seed-to-soil contact. For small spaces, spreading the seed by hand is fine; for larger areas, a broadcast spreader is best. Clover seeds are so tiny, it helps to mix them with some sand or compost to provide even coverage. The clover seeds should be watered daily for two weeks, either by you or from the sky. Don't apply a fertilizer after seeding with clover (it'll stimulate the other grasses to out-compete the clover seeds).

Watering Grass Seed:

The hardest thing about starting lawn seeds is keeping them moist for 10 to 14 days. If it rains every day and stays cloudy, great. If not, you'll need to water at least daily and if the weather is hot and sunny, two to three times a day. Don't let the seeds dry out OR sit in water, so what works best are regular light waterings until the grass germinates and is an inch tall. Watch out for days with low humidity and/or wind, for this will dry out your planting faster than you expect.



Choosing the Seed:

We agree with the University of Maryland that the best all-purpose turf species for the D.C. region is Tall Fescue. The use of recommended tall fescue cultivars usually results in a turfgrass stand of higher quality and density, greater stress tolerance, lower nutrient requirements, less water usage, fewer pest problems and thus reduced pesticide use, greater water infiltration, and reduced runoff.

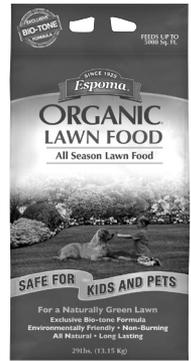
Fertilizing:

Spring is not the best time to feed lawns for several reasons. It encourages top growth that's more susceptible to disease and insect damage, and all that top growth means having to mow more often. Lawns fertilized in spring are also more susceptible to drought because top growth is encouraged, rather than a vigorous root system. Also, broadleaf weeds and crabgrass are getting fed, too, and they thrive. With heavier spring rains (compared to fall), nutrients

in the fertilizer are more likely to run off into waterways than they would in the fall.

But if your lawn is very thin, one spring application of a slow-release organic fertilizer is recommended. We like either **Espoma® Organic Lawn Food** (a 28-pound bag covers 5,000 square feet). Always read and follow the directions on the bag. Then apply again in the fall.

Another way to give your lawn the Nitrogen it needs is to overseed it with clover. Clover is a legume that “fixes Nitrogen”, meaning it turns Nitrogen that’s in the air into Nitrogen that can be used by plants in the soil. A lawn consisting of just 5% clover will produce 2 pounds of Nitrogen per 1,000 square feet and if you let the mower clippings stay on the lawn rather than bagging them, you won’t have to add any other Nitrogen! Clover is available at Behnkes in the spring, which is the best time to plant it.



Applying Lime:

If your lawn looks bad, it may be because the soil pH is too low – it needs to be between 6.0 and 7.0 for soil nutrients to be taken up by the grass. (Common symptoms of low pH include yellowish grass blades and excessive moss.) But DO test your soil first to be sure before adding anything to it. Lime is available in pellet form, which many homeowners find easiest to apply, and also pulverized form. When in doubt as to how much lime is needed, we recommend one 40-pound bags per 1,000 square feet. Lime can be applied anytime - except during hot spells or when the soil is frozen.

Mowing:

It’s important not to cut too short, and three inches is ideal for most lawns. Taller grass develops deeper roots, so is more drought-tolerant. Also, tall grass blades discourage weed growth. Mow frequently, never removing more than 1/3 of the blade at a time if you can help it. (Recognizing that after a solid week of rain it may be corn-like before you can get back to mowing. We understand this ideal isn’t always doable.)

We also recommend what’s known as grasscycling - letting the grass clippings remain on the lawn. They decompose very quickly and are an excellent source of Nitrogen, thereby reducing the amount of fertilizer you need to apply. And if you’re concerned that this will cause excess thatch, experts assure us it doesn’t and that thatch is actually caused by such factors as overwatering and overfertilizing. To prevent Nitrogen runoff, don’t leave grass clippings on streets or sidewalks.

Also, keep your mower blades sharp, to discourage disease.

Controlling Weeds:

If you applied a pre-emergent crabgrass killer to your sunny spots in February, that may be the only weed control application you'll need to do all year. There will be weeds, of course, but if your lawn is thick and healthy, not too many – maybe a number you can tolerate.

For those weeds you DO have, old-fashioned mechanical removal is best - meaning grabbing your favorite weeding tool and getting some exercise. It's less work in the long run if you remove weeds *before* they bloom and release their seeds — as many as hundreds of seeds per plant! Alternatively, you might decide that weeds contribute a little biodiversity to your lawn and that some of them aren't so ugly after all. But we promise that that as you develop a denser, healthier lawn, most weed problems will go away.



Summer

Mowing:

See mowing information above, under Late Winter/Spring.

Controlling Weeds:

See weed control above, under Late Winter/Spring.

Watering:

No longer are authorities recommending that we give lawns an inch of water every week (unless they're newly seeded). To conserve water, we're being encouraged to let lawns go dormant in the summer; they'll quickly green-up naturally in the fall with cooler and wetter weather.

If you need to water because your lawn is new, do it as early in the day as possible but never at night, and preferably when there isn't much wind. Most importantly, water deeply, to one inch, in order to encourage deep roots, thereby increasing drought tolerance. We recommend an "oscillating" type of sprinkler for square or rectangular lawns and an "impulse" for sprinkler for curved or round lawns.

If you use an irrigation system, make sure it's the efficient type with a smart controller that automatically adjusts irrigation schedules based on environmental factors (especially whether it's raining or not). Too much

water is wasted with “set-it & forget it” systems that water whether it’s needed or not.

Watering by hand is not recommended because it’s unlikely to provide the necessary amount of water required to water thoroughly and deeply. However, if you find hand-watering relaxing and enjoy it, just remember to allow adequate time for this task. Allow the water to penetrate the top 4-6 inches of soil before moving on. Test with a stick or probe.



Fall

Final Mowing:

Cut a little shorter than normal to discourage matted grass and snow mold.

Seeding:

Now’s the best time! From roughly August 20 to October 15 is the ideal time to plant grass seed in the D.C.area.

Starting a new lawn — If you’re starting a new lawn, see our “Lawns” brochure. Then be sure to read the University of Maryland’s article on caring for a newly seeded lawn.

Overseeding — If your lawn is thin it’s time to overseed — a lawn maintenance chore that’s needed every three or four years. Pick up our brochure for full instructions in overseeding.

If you have bare spots — Now’s also a great time to fill in bare spots with seed or sod. Pick up our brochure on tips for repairing bare spots.

Applying Lime:

Lime can be applied in the fall (unless it’s unseasonably warm at the time). See information under Late Winter/Spring.

Fertilizing:

Fall is also the best time to feed your lawn (remember, lawns need added Nitrogen - about 2 pounds per 1,000 square feet every year - to stay thick and healthy).It’s best to apply in two applications – one in September and one in October. It’s best to apply in conjunction with core aeration, if possible, especially for a lawn that needs rejuvenating.

Your fertilizer choices are:

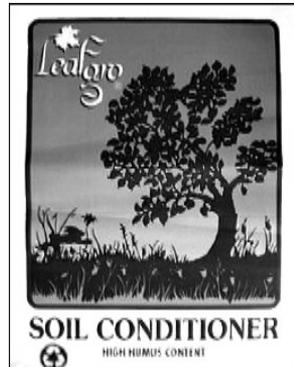
- Organic Fertilizers — made of such ingredients as alfalfa meal, poultry meal, and composted manure. Behnke's recommends **Espoma® Organic Lawn Food Fall Winterizer** (a 30-pound bag covers 5,000 square feet). There's more about the product on Espoma's website. Always read and follow the directions on the bag.
- Synthetic Fertilizers — which are less expensive than organic fertilizers and very popular. If you choose one, be sure it's formulated as a "slow-release" product, like the **Turf Trust®** brand sold at Behnke's because fast-acting synthetic fertilizers are far more likely to run off and cause pollution of our waterways. Whether fast- or slow-acting, synthetic fertilizers have been shown to kill some beneficial microorganisms in the soil.



What about Compost?

The University of Maryland's Fertilizer Facts for Home Lawns include this important note: "No amount of fertilizing is going to overcome poor soil or poor growing conditions. Examples of poor growing conditions include: areas of poor drainage, growing a species of grass not suited for site conditions, compacted soil, or turf with an excessive thatch build-up (which prevents fertilizer and water from reaching the soil)." And "Adding organic matter is the best way to improve poor soil types. Sources of organic matter include: well-rotted manure, compost, leaf mold, grassclippings or processed sewer sludge."

Our favorite type of organic matter for improving soil is compost – but remember that compost is a soil amendment, not a fertilizer. Compost's job is to add organic matter to the soil so it feeds the soil, not the plant. The fiber it adds to the soil helps with moisture retention and aeration. Compost also increases the number of beneficial microorganisms in the soil. We love the **Leafgro®** brand of compost that's made by Montgomery County from leaves collected locally. It's a great product at a great price.



To apply compost, drop it in piles around the lawn, then rake it across the lawn to a thickness of ¼ to ½ inch with a heavy garden rake. On existing lawns it is best to core-aerate the area

and then apply the compost, raking it into the core holes. If that's not possible, simply work a ¼- to ½-inch layer of compost over the surface and be careful not to rake out the grass in the process. Compost should be added to the soil before new lawns are planted.

Clover and mower photos from Susan Harris.

This article was written by Susan Harris for Behnke Nurseries and product information is updated annually by a Behnke staff member.



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