

# Great Lawns Results From Routine Care

The key to a beautiful law is to keep it as healthy and vigorous as possible. A strong, healthy lawn will be able to compete with weeds, recover from foot traffic, resist many diseases, tolerate some insect damage and retain its good looks spring through fall. Below are some key steps in caring for your lawn that will keep it lush, green and healthy without using pesticides.

## Mow at the Right Height

Set your mower to cut at 3 inches high and mow when the grass reaches 4½ inches. This way you'll mow less often **and** have lush, dense turf!

- **Mowing Height** — Set your lawn mower to cut at 3 inches high.
  - ◇ Higher grass crowds out weeds.
  - ◇ A larger root system is developed.
  - ◇ The lawn does not brown out as fast when rainfall is limited.
  - ◇ The grass is more tolerant of wear and stress.
- **Sharpen your mower!** — A well maintained mower will work more efficiently, use less gas, and will last longer.
  - ◇ Dull blades shred the grass tips, leaving a brownish cast over your just-cut lawn.
  - ◇ Moisture loss will increase through a ragged cut surface.
  - ◇ Sharp blades make clean cuts, which let the lawn recover more quickly.
- **Grass Height** — Pay close attention to this!
  - ◇ Letting your grass get high, then cutting it short, makes it more vulnerable to pests, weeds and disease.
  - ◇ Try to remove no more than one-third of the grass blade at any one mowing. If your mower is set to cut at 3-inch, cut your grass when it is 4½-inch tall.

## Fertilize at the Right Time

*A healthy, dense lawn will help reduce weed invasion, and is the best defense against pesticide and fertilizer runoff into our streams and lakes.*

- Fertilizing once or twice a year with nitrogen is environmentally friendly since it makes your turf dense, better able to crowd out weeds and tolerate stress.
- If fertilizing once, apply in late August, early September. If fertilizing twice a year, apply in late May as well.
- Use a slow-release form of nitrogen to minimize loss.
- Don't apply in spring (April through Mid-May) — This is wasteful, because it causes more top growth that you'll just have to mow, instead of root growth.
- Exceptions include — A high maintenance lawn or a thin lawn that needs top growth to cover the ground so weeds can not fill in. Call the Cornell Cooperative Extension office for details on special fertilizer schedules.
- Organic fertilizers — are great. They feed the soil and your lawn. Their timing is different though. For best results, apply in late May and/or late August.

## Consider This...

- Why feed the weeds you're trying to kill? — Fertilizer plus weed killer may save you a step but...
  - ◇ Why apply weed killer where it's not needed? Hand pull or spot treat instead.
  - ◇ The best time to apply fertilizer may not be the best time for the weed killer.
  - ◇ Different weeds are controlled differently. (contact our office for more information)
  - ◇ The best weed control is maintaining a thick, lush turf that will crowd out weeds from the start.
- Should you water during those summer dry spells? The grass that grows in our area is called a cool-season grass that grows best in spring and fall. Hot summer weather is stressful for our lawns, especially when there is little rain.
- If you have a good water supply, give your lawn one inch of water each week. Set a short empty can under the sprinkler and let the water run until one inch accumulates in the can. This is better than light frequent waterings.
- If no extra water is available, allow the lawn to go dormant. It will turn brown and look quite dead, although it is not. Do not mow or fertilize and try to keep foot traffic to a minimum. The grass will green up once the rain and cooler temperatures return.

# What's in a bag of fertilizer?

- What do the numbers mean? All fertilizers have 3 numbers listed, such as 33-3-3 or 3-4-1, indicating the percent of each nutrient it contains. The first number is nitrogen(N), the second is phosphorus(P) and the third is potassium(K).
- Lawns need only nitrogen so look for bags with a higher first number (N) and low second and third numbers.
- 33-3-3 and 10-0-0 are examples of ideal formulations for lawns. The numbers may vary slightly but the first number should be much larger than the other two.
- An exception is with newly seeded lawns. They benefit from one application at the time of planting of “starter fertilizer” which is higher in P and has slow-release N. The bag will have the words “starter fertilizer for lawns” on it.
- Soil tests don't test for N and since that is the only nutrient lawns need, testing is of little use for lawns. It is helpful to test the pH of your soil however.
- Lime is not a nutrient; it is used to raise the pH. Sulfur lowers pH. The only way to know if you need to add any and how much is to have your soil pH tested. Cooperative Extension offices test pH and many garden centers do as well.
- Seeding, renovating, weed management, grub control and other lawn practices
- For information on these practices and for more information in general, contact our office, our local Web site (<http://ecgardening.cce.cornell.edu>) or Cornell's lawn Web site ([www.gardening.cornell.edu/lawn](http://www.gardening.cornell.edu/lawn))

# Facts to Consider

- Leave the grass clippings on your lawn! If clippings clump from your mower, you probably waited too long before mowing. Rake them up and use them as mulch, then don't let the lawn get quite so high before mowing again. Mowing at the proper height reduces clumping and the clippings add nitrogen and organic matter to your lawn. Clippings don't cause thatch—they actually help reduce it.
- Rolling, if necessary, can be done once per year. Roll in the early spring before growth starts. Use a roller just heavy enough to press the frost-heaved plants back into the soil.
- Weed Control — The best form of weed control is prevention. Research consistently shows that fall fertilization and mowing at the proper height give lawn grasses a competitive advantage over weeds. Contact our office for more information on specific weeds.
- Grubs — A healthy, well watered lawn can co-exist with quite a grub population. Call the Cornell Cooperative Extension office for help with grub control.
- Moles — Tunnels made by moles are most visible in spring. Moles are solitary so only one or two will inhabit a lawn. They are seldom seen and are frequently mistaken for mice or shrews. Prominent features are paddle-like forefeet and large toenails. Spraying your lawn with insecticides or other poisons is not effective. Trapping is the only effective method.

### *For more specific information*

Some of the information here is general in nature. Your local Cooperative Extension Office has more detailed information. Please call the office in your county with any questions about your lawn

## Maintaining Healthy Lawns



### Cornell Cooperative Extension of Clinton and Essex Counties

For more information on lawns and other topics, contact your Cooperative Extension Office

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