

# Spring Lawn Care Guide

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The main purpose of spring lawn care is to get the grass through the summer. Cool-season grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, and the fescues need to develop a strong root system in order to survive summer's heat and dry conditions. Warm-season grasses such as zoysia grass, buffalo grass, and Bermuda grass require different care because they thrive between mid-April and October.

Ideally, our lawn care calendar should be from September 1 through August 31, and **not** April 1 through March 31. This would encourage nine months of cool-season growth before summer's conditions. Thinking that lawn care starts in the spring only allows a couple months of growth before demanding environmental conditions.

However, there are several practices that you can undertake in the spring to make sure your lawn has the best chance.

## MOWING

As soon as the grass needs cutting, mow it. Don't wait. If you allow the grass to get tall before mowing, you run the risks of stressing the plants and encouraging diseases.

*Cool-Season Grasses:* Most cool-season grasses should be cut at a 2- to 2½-inch height. This means mowing the lawn when it reaches 3 to 4 inches to avoid cutting off more than you leave.

*Warm-Season Grasses:* Zoysia grass should be mowed at 1 to 1½ inches, while Bermuda grass can be kept even shorter at ½ inch. Mow buffalo grass at the same height as cool-season grasses.

Also, avoid mowing wet grass as it encourages the spread of diseases and can lead to an uneven cut. If the grass is too tall, consider bagging or using a mulcher mower to limit thatch buildup.

## FERTILIZING

Early spring fertilizer applications should be avoided, if possible. Early fertilizers tend to green up the lawn, which isn't visually bad. However, adding nitrogen fertilizers tends to stimulate shoot development at the expense of root growth. Cool spring temperatures favor root growth more than shoot growth, which creates a denser and deeper root system for the turf. That deeper and denser root system means a better chance of survival for the summer, especially hot, dry conditions.

If, and that's a big IF, you must fertilize in the early spring, do so at a low rate. Think about it ten times before finally committing. Typically, homeowners have applied about 1 pound of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. This is probably too much.

Instead, apply fertilizer at ¼ the rate. This means that if the fertilizer bag says it will cover 5,000 square feet, it should cover 20,000 square feet.

A low rate of fertilizer will be enough to green up the turf but not over-stimulate the shoot growth.

*Cool-Season Grasses:* A full application of fertilizer could be applied during the middle of May (Mother's Day weekend) IF you intend to water the lawn throughout the summer. Another alternative would be to use a slow-release fertilizer that provides nutrients throughout the summer. Slow-release fertilizers need less moisture and seldom burn turf. Realize that spring fertilizers may increase the chances of summer diseases.

*Warm-Season Grasses:* Zoysia grass should be fertilized May 1 and July 1. Bermuda grass could be fertilized every month between May and August. Buffalo grass needs little fertilizer—once every other year in late spring is usually enough.



## WEED CONTROL

Crabgrass pre-emergence chemicals can be applied in the early spring. Crabgrass germinates when the soil temperature has been 55 degrees or warmer for 7 to 10 CONSECUTIVE days.

Crabgrass also needs light, air and open space to germinate. Bluegrass is more aggressive than crabgrass, and if the space isn't there to germinate, the crabgrass seed won't. Look for those bare areas in the lawn and apply the crabgrass controls in these areas. Avoid applying it in thick, lush stands of turf where it's not needed.

April 1 tends to be a good time to apply crabgrass preventers.

Most of the compounds have a residual time of 4 to 6 weeks. A second application around the middle of May (Mother's Day) will help control late-germinating crabgrass as well as warm-season annual grass weeds.

Avoid crabgrass-fertilizer combinations. These combination products stimulate the shoots to grow at the expense of the roots. There are plain "crabgrass killers" on the market. If you don't find one, ask if one can be ordered. **Carefully read and follow all directions on the chemical label.**

Most crabgrass preventers also kill grass seed. So, seeded lawns should be growing and mown at least once before applying crabgrass preventers.



## SODDING

Sodding can occur any time the ground isn't frozen. Sodding requires the same type of soil preparation as seeding, as well as frequent waterings to keep the roots from drying until they establish. Sod is an ideal means of filling in patches without ripping up the entire lawn. Make sure you cut out the area so the sod fits snugly.

Like seeding, sod should be mowed when it needs to be mowed. While you want to avoid heavy activity on sod until it does become established, mowing will not hurt it.

Zoysia grass and Bermuda grass are often started in the early spring, usually by plugging (preferred), although they can be established by sprigging or stolonizing. In all cases, it will take two to three years for the yard to become established. You may be lucky and find zoysia grass and Bermuda grass sod, but it's not too common.

## SEEDING

For cool-season grass, seeding should occur as soon as possible. Ideally, bluegrass seed needs two months of good growing to mature. Seeding success after mid-April isn't guaranteed, and the end of April is pushing it. Buffalo grass is usually started by seed in mid- to late April.

In order for seed to germinate, continual moisture is needed. Do not allow the seed to dry out; this may mean daily or twice-daily waterings. Seed should also have good contact with the soil. After seeding, rake the seed in to get soil contact. An empty roller can also be used.

Think of spring seeding as a way to fill in bare patches in the sod or an entire lawn due to construction. Overseeding to thicken a turf could also be done in early April. Overseed at the rate of 1 pound of bluegrass seed per 1,000 square feet. A slit seeder is ideal; seeding and raking is a second choice alternative.

Choose the correct seed type for your situation. A "blend" of different cultivars or horticulture varieties of the same grass, such as three or four different types of Kentucky bluegrass, will increase the disease resistance of the lawn. A "mixture" of seed, such as bluegrass and the quick-germinating perennial ryegrass, may help in getting a lawn established quicker.

Make sure you work the soil to a depth of 6 to 8 inches before seeding. Add 4 to 6 inches of compost or other organic matter.

## AERATION

Next to the winterizer fertilizer, aeration may be the best process for your turf in the fall. Loosening the soil allows better root growth, which means better shoot growth. Aeration is the process of increasing the soil's air content. An ideal soil will contain 50 percent spaces. Half of those spaces, or 25 percent of the total soil structure, will be for air.

A core aerator will pull 1- to 2-inch plugs of soil from the ground. Holes are usually pulled every 3 to 4 inches in the lawn. Plugs are deposited on the soil's surface where they will break down. Often, the lawn is mowed the following day, shattering the plugs after they've dried. Soil surrounding the plugged holes and the soil deposited on top will collapse and fill in.

Turf soil should be aerated at least once a year on heavy, compacted, or clay soils. At a minimum recommended rate, turf should be aerated at least once every three to five years.

Grass should be growing before core aeration takes place. September 1 is the ideal time to aerate cool-season grasses; the process could also occur around April 1 on heavily compacted or clay soils. Aerate warm-season grasses in early May because they are rapidly growing. Soil should be moist but not soggy. Aerifiers will not penetrate dry soil.

**Do NOT use any aerifying equipment that simply punches a hole in the soil.** While a hole may be created, the "punched" soil merely compacts in the surrounding area. Golf or football cleats, or shoes/sandals with nails pounded through the soles should be avoided.

## DETHATCHING

A thatch layer greater than 1 inch can result in serious disease and stress problems. On cool-season grasses, September is the primary time to remove ½ inch of thatch using a dethatcher, power rake or vertical mower. This should be done around September 1 as the grass starts to actively grow again after remaining dormant during the summer. Dethatch warm-season grasses annually in early May to remove all stems, roots, and crowns. Follow up with a fertilizer application.

Do not remove more than ½ inch. Grass roots and plants will likely be removed and your turf will be thinned. However, dethatching can also occur April 1, and you can remove another ½ inch. Aerate AFTER dethatching if both processes will take place.

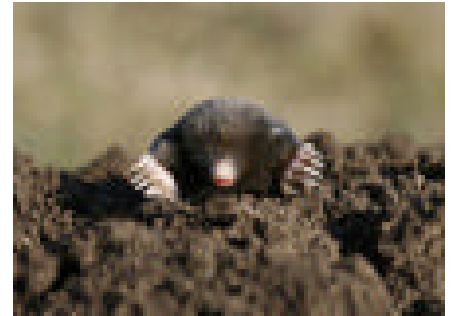
Too much thatch signals another problem such as too much water, too much fertilizer, poor mowing habits, or an over-reliance on chemicals.

## MOLE CONTROL

Moles are solitary creatures, feeding mainly on earthworms, grubs, and other soil creatures. They do NOT feed on plant roots, seeds or bulbs but may damage them with their tunneling or paws as they hunt for food.

Moles tend to be extremely active, feeding for several hours and then resting for a few hours, and starting the feeding/resting process all over.

Most moles need to consume 80 to 100 percent of their body weight each day in order to stay alive, which is why there are lots of tunnels.



Moles prefer a wooded area over a new subdivision built in a corn or soybean field because there are more edibles beneath the trees than under soil that is constantly turned.

Controlling moles can be difficult. You can remove the mole causing the trouble, but another is likely to replace it.

Poison peanuts and pellets will NOT work. Moles won't eat them; they just push them aside. Gas cartridges generally don't work due to the excessive nature of the tunnels.

There are pesticide worms available, though they are somewhat costly. Moles will eat them and die.

Traps are also a good option, and there are several types on the market. However, they need to be placed in the main run and not the branching food tunnels. The main tunnel run usually won't be straight, but just about every other tunnel branches off of it. If you are unsure, just step on all the tunnels and watch to see which one is pushed back up the next day.

When you see mole runs, you can step on the tunnels to bring the soil levels back in contact with each other; this keeps the roots from being exposed to the tunnel's air.

## COOL-SEASON GRASS QUICK GUIDE

<b>Task</b>	<b>Best Time</b>
Mowing	When grass reaches 3 to 4 inches, cut to a 2 to 2½-inch height
Fertilizing	Mid-May
Crabgrass Control	First application around April 1 Second application in mid-May
Seeding	Before mid-April
Aerating	Around September 1 A second time around April 1 on heavily compacted or clay soils
Dethatching	Around September 1 and again around April 1

## WARM-SEASON GRASS QUICK GUIDE

<b>Task</b>	<b>Best Time</b>
Mowing	Cut zoysia grass to 1 to 1½ inches; Bermuda grass ½ inch; buffalo grass at same height as cool-season grasses
Fertilizing	Fertilize zoysia grass, May 1 and July 1; Bermuda grass every month between May and August; buffalo grass once every other year in late spring
Crabgrass Control	First application around April 1; second application in mid-May
Seeding/Sodding	Put in zoysia and Bermuda grass plugs in early spring; seed buffalo grass in mid- to late April
Aerating	In early May
Dethatching	In early May, followed by fertilizing

