

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.

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. 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. If you allow the grass to get tall before mowing, you run the risks of stressing the plants and encouraging diseases.

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.

Sharpen your mower blades. Sharp blades are essential. A sharp blade makes a clean cut. Sharpen blades at least twice a year.

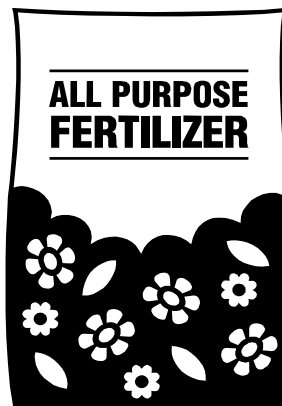
FERTILIZING

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 tend 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. 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 would provide 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.

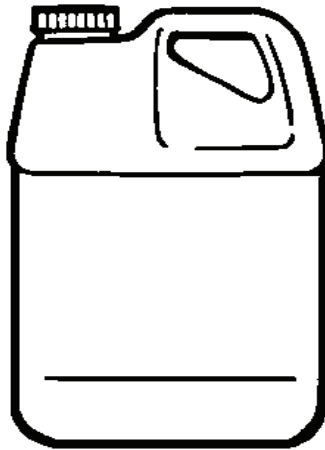


WEED CONTROL

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.**



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.

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.

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.

SEEDING

Seeding should occur as soon as possible. Ideally, bluegrass seed needs two months of good growing to mature. Seeding success after the middle of the April isn't guaranteed. The end of April is pushing it. 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; the process could also occur around April 1 on heavily compacted or clay soils. Soil conditions 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. 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.

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.

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Task	Best Time
Mowing	As soon as lawn needs it – when grass reaches 3 to 4 inches
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

