

KEEPING LAWNS HEALTHY

Everyone wants the nicest looking lawn on the block. It's just human nature.

Understanding the need for and effects of a well-planned fertilizer program is the first step in not only keeping up with, but actually making the Joneses jealous. Of course you can always have a lawn service apply your fertilizer program but for a significant cost savings (and most likely better results) you can easily do the job yourself. Here's what you need to know to effectively feed and protect your lawn all year long.

Why?

Every time we mow our lawns, we remove part of the plant causing it to work harder and grow a new shoot. The most important thing you can do for a growing lawn is to feed it with the proper nutrition. Regular fertilizing also strengthens grass, helping protect it from heat, drought, insects and diseases. Furthermore, the best way to prevent weeds is with a well-fed, thick and healthy lawn.

This discussion will center on chemical fertilizers because they're much more commonly used, but there are also effective natural methods for keeping your lawn healthy throughout the year. If you are interested in a natural fertilizing program, consult your local garden center and research various methods. Most natural fertilizers have distinct benefits and over-fertilizing is not an issue. The biggest drawbacks to natural methods are their release can be dramatically affected by weather and they're much slower acting than chemicals.

When?

Most lawns require four to five feedings each year, beginning



with your first mow and ending when your grass is finished growing for the year. Here's a basic feeding timeline:

Early spring (February to April)—A spring feeding strengthens roots and helps kick off a good growing season. This is also the time to apply a pre-emergent crabgrass control, which can usually be found in combination with fertilizer for a one-step application.

Late spring/early summer (May to June)—This is the big growth season for your lawn and also when broadleaf weeds are actively growing. Your best bet this time of year is a fertilizer mix with broadleaf weed control. Be sure to apply it to a damp lawn (onto morning dew is ideal) and allow at least two days with no rain after application.

Late summer (July to August)—Your heat-stressed grass that's been subject to running kids and dogs does not need a lot of fertilizer but an application will certainly help the recovery process. Be careful not to fertilize when temperatures are above 90°F.



Each issue, *Green Profit* organizes a ready-made class on livegood and hardgood topics in the form of a magazine page you can tear out, even giving it to customers who want questions answered, myths debunked and a reason to be in a garden environment, regardless of the season. You provide the customers and example products; we'll do the rest.

Early fall (September to October)—Since fall is the best time to seed a lawn, it makes sense it's also most important time to fertilize your lawn with the nutrients it needs to recover from the summer, especially if you skipped the mid-summer application.

Late fall/early winter (November to December)—This will be the last time your lawn is fed before the winter months and the appropriate fertilizer will strengthen roots and increase nitrogen storage to give your lawn a head start in the spring.

What?

There are two basic types of lawn fertilizer, soluble and controlled release. As mentioned before, we're concentrating on synthetics or chemical fertilizers, although many natural methods are also available.

Soluble synthetic fertilizers are produced by chemical reaction, from organic or inorganic materials. They quickly release nutrients into the soil and deliver a fast green up. Because they don't depend on microbes, like natural fertilizers, they're readily available, delivering at critical time periods with precise and known effects. These fertilizers do require more frequent feedings, even as many as six throughout the year and have the capability to burn your lawn if applied incorrectly.

Controlled-release fertilizers are sometimes called timed-release or slow-release and combine some characteristics of natural and synthetic fertilizers. Some contain nitrogen as part of a complex compound that breaks down slowly in soil while others are actually coated pellets that release each time they get wet, introducing small amounts of nutrients into the soil.

Be sure to talk to a lawn care specialist at your local garden center to make sure you're using the correct fertilizer formulation for your location.

How?

The final step in fertilizing, after you've chosen the day and type of fertilizer, is application. If you plan on continuing to fertilize your lawn on a regular basis, you'll want to buy a spreader. There are many makes and models available but the basic choice is if you want a rotary-style or drop spreader. Choose a drop spreader if you have a very small lawn or wish to apply your fertilizer very precisely, although it will take some time. Rotary spreaders literally throw the fertilizer in a swath of several feet, getting the job done much more quickly. One consideration is how many flowerbeds you have in your lawn. If your yard is "crowded" consider a drop spreader to avoid overfertilizing garden beds.

Everyone has their own pattern for spreading fertilizer but the experts say to make header strips at each end of the lawn and to

go back and forth shutting off the spreader and turning around after each row. Watch the spread of your fertilizer and adjust aisle widths accordingly.

What next?

Many people overseed their lawns every year, simply spreading a light layer of grass seed over their entire lawn before winter to help fill in any bare spots in spring. This is a good idea that will only help keep your lawn healthy and full. Grub control is another issue for homeowners in some areas, but that's an entire topic of its own. If you notice sections of your lawn dead, gone or peeled back, chances are you have grubs. The best way to check is to tightly grab a section of turf near the damaged area and pull it straight up. If it comes up easily (like a toupee) grubs have sheared off the roots and you need to treat with a grub control product immediately. Another common lawn problem is moss, which can be easily treated with powdered or palletized lime. For help with these and other problems, contact your local garden center as soon as you detect a problem.



Healthy Lawn = Disease Resistance

According to the University of California Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources, maintaining a healthy, vigorously growing lawn is the best way to prevent a severe disease outbreak in a turfgrass. A 5,000 square foot lawn contains about four million turfgrass plants, each requiring optimum amounts of water and fertilizer, the right mowing regime, and an aerated, well-drained soil. About 75 to 85 percent of common lawn diseases can be avoided altogether just by optimizing these practices to avoid stressed grass, which is much more susceptible to disease outbreaks than healthy grass. 🌿

By Bill Calkins with help from the lawn care experts at the Scotts/Miracle-Gro Company. Visit them on the Web at LawnCare.Scotts.com.