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## Lawn Care Basics

by Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

With all the rain we've been getting our cool season grass lawns are growing fast and vying for our attention. Many of us tend to take our lawns for granted. Just like our vegetables, flowers and woody plants, lawns do require some care to look their best and to withstand foot traffic and varying environmental conditions.

Proper care of the lawn consists of selecting grass species most suited to your site conditions as well as watering, weeding, fertilizing, liming and pest control. This is not to say one must be fanatical about lawn care. Turf grasses in general are quite tough and adaptable and can take a fair amount of abuse. Proper maintenance, however, will result in fewer weed, insect and disease problems which minimizes the use of chemical controls.

It is usually advisable to have a mixture of turf species in your lawn rather than all one type. Common cool season grass mixtures for this area contain Kentucky bluegrass, fescues and perennial ryegrass. A good mixture for sunny areas might contain about 40 percent each bluegrass and fescues and the rest perennial ryegrass. Fescue species do best in shady areas although they still need a minimum of 4 hours of direct sun each day to grow well.

This cool, moist spring means there is still time to reseed any bare spots or to overseed thin areas. Ideally, turf grasses need 4 to 6 inches of topsoil for good root establishment. Scratch up the soil slightly and seed at directed rates. On sunny days, be sure to water to keep the seedbed moist but not overly wet. The perennial ryegrass, a coarser grass, germinates first, usually in 7 days and serves as a nurse crop for the slower germinating fescue and bluegrass.

Lawns should be fertilized at least once a year but optimally up to three times. The best times to fertilize are mid-May, mid-September and mid-October. Avoid fertilizing during hot, dry spells as the plants may be injured.

When purchasing lawn fertilizers, note that lawn maintenance fertilizers are phosphorus-free which is evidenced by the middle number of the guaranteed fertilizer analysis on the package being zero. For example, you might find a 22-0-4 on the label. The three numbers always stand for the percent nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium in that particular product.

In 2013, Connecticut passed a law prohibiting additions of phosphorus to established lawns unless a recommendation was made by a soil testing lab within the past two years to apply this element. This legislation was passed to prevent excess phosphorus from contaminating our ground and surface waters. Fertilizers containing phosphorus can be used for seeding, sodding and overseeding as this nutrient aids in root growth and establishment. A soil test ([www.soiltest.uconn.edu](http://www.soiltest.uconn.edu)) will tell you how much and what kinds of fertilizer to use.

Soil test results also recommend the addition of limestone if necessary to raise the soil pH. Our soils tend to be acidic in many areas of Connecticut so applying limestone is usually necessary every other year or so.

Watering is necessary after any seeding and during dry, hot spells. Lawns prefer to be watered deeply on a weekly basis when no appreciable precipitation occurs rather than a light sprinkling on a more frequent schedule. Deep watering promotes healthy root growth giving you a lawn better able to withstand stress.

Mowing grass at 2.5 to 3 inches aids in weed control as the taller height shades out many weed species like crabgrass. If mowed on a regular basis, clippings can be left in place and will decompose rapidly adding nutrients and organic matter to the soil. In fact, research at the University of Connecticut has shown that the nutrients returned to the soil by leaving the clippings are equivalent to one fertilizer application. This practice saves you time and money and is beneficial to the lawn as well.



Always make sure your lawn mower blades are sharp when cutting the grass. Dull blades will rip the grass (see image) and can contribute to greater disease problems. Most turf diseases can be controlled by practicing proper cultural practices. Fungicides are rarely necessary.

Lawns do come with their share of weed and insect problems which are best addressed by the horticulturists at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center ([www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu)).

We get many complaints about moss growing in lawns. Moss grows for several reasons most commonly on sites that are too shaded, poorly drained, compacted, infertile or acidic. Often it is a combination of these reasons. Unless the conditions conducive to moss development are corrected, it will continue to colonize the area.

For questions on lawn care or other horticultural topics, call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website, [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension office.