WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
SNOHOMISH COUNTY EXTENSION

Community Horticulture Fact Sheet # 79
Lawn Care

Lawns can be attractive without contributing to water quality problems. The tips below will help you maintain a healthy lawn that can be more resistant to weed and other pest infestations.

GRASS TYPE

Whether you are planting a new lawn or overseeding an existing lawn, choosing the right grass seed is important. Turf-type perennial ryegrass and fine fescue grow well in our area. Kentucky bluegrass should not be a large proportion of the seed mix, as it usually thins out in western Washington. Bentgrass lawns require special care. If you use bentgrass, plant only colonial types (not creeping bentgrass). Be prepared to mow frequently with a reel-type mower and watch for excessive thatch build-up.

IRRIGATE PROPERLY

Established lawns in Western Washington use about one inch of water per week during the peak growing season (July - September). Place straight-sided cans (tuna cans) on your lawn while watering to determine how much water you are applying. Water infrequently, but deeply. Light, frequent irrigation encourages weeds, undesirable grasses, surface rooting and disease problems. Water to wet the soil 4" to 6" down. Grass roots will grow deeper. The lawn will be healthier.

Test for water penetration by slowly watering an area for 15 to 30 minutes. Push a shovel into the soil and tilt it forward. If the soil isn't wet 4" to 6" down, continue watering. Track the watering time, so you know about how long to water. Irrigate slowly, so the water doesn't run off. Over-watering can wash pesticides and fertilizers into storm drains. If water runs off or pools even with slow irrigation, soil compaction may be a problem. (See Lawn Aeration.)

Loam and clay soils hold more moisture and dry out slowly. They ordinarily need water once a week. Sandy soils dry out most quickly and need more frequent irrigation. Allow the top two inches to dry before watering again. Don't over-water. Grass roots need air. Saturated soils encourage surface rooting and weak turf.

You may choose not to water your lawn during the summer. A healthy, established lawn will turn brown, but will survive if some moisture remains in the soil. Weeds can get established during the summer brown-out and the turf will not withstand rough use, like an actively growing lawn. A bentgrass lawn will green up again with the return of rain in the fall. Some fine fescues will green up very slowly. With perennial ryegrass, if the soil totally dries out, you will lose it and need to overseed.

MOW CORRECTLY

Improper mowing can be stressful to your lawn and make it more susceptible to pests and diseases. Remove only 1/3 of the leaf blade at one cutting. Mow when the grass is dry and at the appropriate height for your grass. Moderate grass heights shade the soil and help prevent water loss and weed seed germination. Mow your lawn at 1 ½", except bentgrass, which needs to be mowed at ¾" to help limit thatch build-up. Keep mower blades sharp. Dull blades shred the grass and make it more vulnerable to problems.

600 128th Street SE, Everett, WA 98208-6353
425-338-2400 • Fax: 425-338-3994 • Master Gardeners: 425-357-6010 • TDD 1 -800-833-6388
• http://snohomish.wsu.edu • http://gardening.wsu.edu

Extension programs and policies are consistent with federal and state laws and regulations on nondiscrimination regarding race, sex, religion, age, color, creed, national or ethnic origin; physical, mental or sensory disability; marital status, sexual orientation, or status as a Vietnam-era or disabled veteran. Evidence of noncompliance may be reported through your local Extension office.

FERTILIZING
Generally, lawns in our area need 4 pounds of actual nitrogen per 1000 sq. ft. each year. It is best to divide the fertilizer into four applications. The two most important applications are on September 1 and June 15 with the other two applications made around April 15 and between November 15 and December 7. Use a fertilizer with about a 3:1:2 ratio (6:1:4, 10:2:6, etc.) The first number represents the percentage of nitrogen in the fertilizer. Use it to figure the amount needed to get 1 pound actual nitrogen for each application. (For example, you would need 20 pounds of fertilizer with 5% nitrogen to get one pound of actual nitrogen.) Don't overdo it. Excess nitrogen promotes excess growth and makes a lawn more susceptible to pests and diseases. It also could run off with surface water or leach into groundwater. Clean up fertilizer from sidewalks and driveways.

Use organic fertilizers June or September (not November – April, since they can leach with cool soils and heavy rainfall.) Use other slow-release fertilizers, such as sulfur- or polymer-coated ureas at any time. These products release nutrients slowly over a longer period, allowing the grass to absorb nutrients more efficiently.

LEAVE CLIPPINGS ON THE LAWN
Grass clippings provide many nutrients, reducing the need for nitrogen fertilizer by as much as 25% if you fertilize regularly. This means you can apply 3 lbs. of nitrogen per 1000 sq. ft. instead of 4 lbs. per year. Clippings must be small enough to decompose quickly. Recycling clippings does not promote thatch buildup.

DEAL SENSIBLY WITH WEEDS
Proper fertility, mowing and watering will usually produce a thick lawn with few weeds. If you provide good culture, the grass will compete well with weeds and moss. You may find you can tolerate some weeds, particularly those that blend with turf. Broadleaf weeds like dandelions and plantain can be removed by hand. Nonselective spot treatments may be useful in certain situations, especially for perennial weedy grasses. Reseed any bare spots that result from your weeding.

LAWN AERATION
Aerate spots where you can't push a screwdriver 6" into the soil, where water pools, grass looks thin or where traffic is heavy. Use a hollow-tined aerator that removes plugs of soil, either a foot-operated or motorized model. Irrigate deeply, then allow the soil to dry slightly before aerating. Soil should be moist 6" down, so the aerator will penetrate as deeply as possible. Leave the plugs on the lawn and break them up with a rake.

THATCHING LAWNS
Thatch is living and dead grass stems, shoots and roots, that accumulate on top of the soil. Thick thatch prevents air, water, and nutrients from reaching the soil. Good fertility, irrigation and correct mowing heights can help prevent thatch buildup. If it is more than ½" thick, remove thatch with a rake or rented thatching machine. For best results, remove it February through April or late August through September. Heavy thatching may result in thin turf, so overseeding is often needed.

LAWN SUBSTITUTES
If you have spots that are very shady, hard to mow or water or you just have too much lawn, consider replacing some turf with an attractive ground cover. Snohomish County Extension Fact Sheet #77 describes some ground cover alternatives.