



Fall is here and the turf is screaming for a bit of pre-winter care. With this season's dry weather came a bit of a respite from the mowing, fertilizing and weed control. But, it is now time to get that lawn whipped into shape for a healthy spring season. Those crispy weeds will be back in full force, the crabgrass will rise again and the dandelions may even bloom in December (remember when they did that a few years ago?). What to tackle first... A good suggestion is to always survey the situation before beginning, as good observation is the key to good resolution. So, let's take a look. Overall, how did it do this past year? Any areas of compaction should be addressed. If before the turf went dormant, the color was pathetic and inconsistent, nutrition may be the culprit. Some insect populations have been a problem in our area in the past few years. If you had infestations that were heavier than usual, maybe it's time to figure out a treatment. Did you notice any health issues or other problems that left bare spots?

Compaction will quickly reduce the quality and quantity of your turf. It can become a problem in areas with high foot traffic, next to the drive (especially if you regularly miss with one wheel), or if the dog decides to run along one fence line for a few weeks. If this is a problem for you, now is the best time to aerate. Aerating involves reducing the soil density through introduction of air space. It is not a difficult process, but unless you can find the right equipment and possess the honed skills of a true do-it-yourselfer, hire it out. If you insist on handling this yourself, look for aerating equipment that will get to a depth of about 3". You may have to go to a commercial equipment rental company to find something that will work well. The aerators that remove cores of soil (core aerators) do a good job of opening the soil area around turf roots. This is important not only for reducing soil compaction but also for increasing the ability of air, moisture and nutrients to get to that root zone.

The color of turf can be a good indicator of nutritional health and often will announce the presence of disease. In general, the color of nutritionally well fed grass will be a nice moderate green. When you get down at turf level – and please do so – look at the leaf blades. The color should be uniform throughout. If you do not currently have a fertilization program, perhaps you should re-evaluate. According to UW-Madison turf specialist, Dr. John Steir, most sunny lawns will use, roughly, 4 pounds of nitrogen per 1000 square feet every year. If you do not add anything to the soil to accommodate that level of usage, nutritional deficits will happen. If you have a very low maintenance lawn, one that is kept mown at about 3" – 3 ½", and is not in a high traffic or high stress area, the addition of even one fertilizer application will greatly benefit the health of your turf. If when you mow, you leave the clippings on the turf area, the nitrogen provided is almost the equivalent of one fertilizer application per year. How fantastic is that? But,

how much should you really apply at one time? For the average homeowner lawn, it will be roughly 1 pound per 1000 square feet in the sunny areas and about half of that in the shade - definitely not 4 pounds per 1000 square feet. You should, of course, follow the recommendations on any and all of the products you purchase – using the above information as an estimated guide only.

If you don't do it at any other time, fertilize your lawn around Halloween – all of the current research says it is the most important application of the year, highly recommended. But what should you use? Not just now but at any time throughout the year, we need to make the most of our outside work. So consumers and overburdened homeowners often look to the products that will handle two or three application needs in one outing. Don't do it. If you are going to fertilize, use fertilizer. For the consistent and overall health of your turf stand, try to find a fertilizer product that is comprised of about half slow release formula. This will slowly feed the turf (a good thing), providing consistent nutrition over an extended period. If you use a fast release formulation, the turf will quickly respond to the influx of food, providing an immediate greening. Then like a refined sugar high, the turf will hit the skids when the supply runs out.

Insect control is an interesting game. The makers of the home use products give the homeowner way too many choices. The best approach is to do nothing until you know, positively, what you are trying to control. Know your enemy. Once you have correctly identified the critter, you can use knowledge of the life cycle to appropriately choose and time product application for maximum control. If you are going to try to control insects, use a product or control method for specific pests not the entire insect world.

Got pesky weeds? Whether you choose cultural control (okay pulling weeds didn't sound as cool), organic or synthetic products, find the right product for the right problem plant. And you can't do that unless you identify said problem plant. Annual and perennial weeds are controlled differently. As with insect control, finding the most vulnerable stage in the life cycle will provide you with a nice window of opportunity to get rid of it with the least amount of work and money. If you do have problems with perennial weeds, wait for a hard frost before you apply a systemic product. That hard frost signals to the plant that is time to seriously send food to the roots. Applying a systemic killer at this time will take advantage of the free and faster ride to the roots. Hmmm, very effective.

Just remember, that whatever products you apply to your lawn, be responsible to yourself, other humans and the environment at large. Only use what is called for and be careful in your storage of unused products. Kids and pets are curious creatures.