Getting Your Lawn in Shape for Summer

by The Garden Hoe, Lis Friemoth

We are all itching to see the green, smell the spring and begin the rituals of mowing. But Mother Nature has reminded us that we have a bit more winter to endure. So, rather than be impatient and just pace around the mower in anticipation, stop for a moment and take some time to review the past performance of your turf. Whether you are happy or unhappy with the performance of your turf, reviewing the quality of care and management practices will jumpstart the lawn care planning for this season.

Testing your soil is one of the best tools homeowners have in their bag of turf care tricks. Good testing, from a quality lab, will give you a baseline understanding of soil type, pH, nutrient levels and any amendments needed to bring your soil to optimum levels for high quality turf production. Knowing the soil type is important information – it is, after all the underground structure of your yard. In the world of turf growth, this structure affects the choice of seed, drainage, and water and nutrient uptake. Soil pH that is either too high (alkaline) or too low (acid) can inhibit the growth of some grass varieties and may render fertilizers useless. It can also adversely affect the ability of your turf to ward off disease and insect pressures. But before adding any pH changing amendments to your soil – even seemingly innocuous products such as lime or peat moss – test first, don't guess. Any needed pH amendments will be easier to accomplish with the expert assistance of a soil professional.

Equipment that is kept in good running condition, with regularly sharpened blades, is less likely to cause damage to turf grass, will spew fewer fumes into the environment and have less potential for causing physical harm to the operator. Dull blades will rip and shred the turf grass leaves, causing damage that weakens the plant structure (an invitation to diseases) and lessening the ability of the grass to regenerate quickly and properly. Sharpened blades make clean cuts that seal over quickly, allowing the plant to use stored energy to encourage and maintain healthy growth not continually repair damage. An optimal mowing height of 2 ½" to 3" is recommended for most lawns - mowing at a frequency that will remove no more than 1/3 of the blade height each time. In our area, on a typical bluegrass lawn, that will be roughly every seven to ten days, weather dependent. Mowing at a shorter height encourages the turf grass to grow at a faster rate, creating stressful growth conditions for the turf grass system. Shorter turf heights also allow more sun to penetrate the canopy, increasing potential weed seed germination.

As a heavy nitrogen feeder, turf grass needs good fertility to maintain healthy growth. What is a good fertility program and how much is enough fertilizer? Turf grass variety and level of usage play an important role in determining what type of a program you need to follow. For high quality and high stress turf areas (golf courses and sports fields), frequent feeding is an absolute necessity. For the normal home turf situation, a much lower maintenance schedule is generally appropriate. UW-Madison turf experts recommend following a "holiday schedule" of Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day and Halloween for general fertilizer applications in a higher maintenance home situation.

For a relatively healthy, low use lawn, you could cut back to two applications - early and late season. (Always follow the recommendations and instructions on the product used to ensure correct application procedures and necessary precautions.) Remember that water is an important part of good turf grass health. For established turf stands, a general rule of thumb is 1" of water per week. For newly established turf, between 1" and 2" per week is recommended. Providing adequate water aids in the uptake of any supplied nutrients.

Weed and insect control are major issues when growing turf. Expect that some weeds will infiltrate and some insects will invade no matter how regimented your lawn care system is. Given that expectation – you must decide at what point they are intolerable. Identification is the first key step to gaining control over the situation. There are many ways to identify the weeds and insects. Sources include professional assistance, books, online resources, garden centers, farm stores, or co-ops. Once you have confidently identified the problem, and have decided on a control method – organic chemicals, synthetic chemical or cultural - do a little research. Find out the growing or life cycle and when that particular problem is at the weakest or most vulnerable point. For perennial weeds, this is often when in flower or after the first couple of hard frosts. For annual weeds, the easiest control timing and method is to physically remove the plants prior to flowering or to suppress the seed before it germinates. For insects, it varies from youth to egg laying stages. There are many control products and services in the homeowner market. Single problem treatments are often the best as good timing is essential for good control. Avoid fertilizer/pesticide/insecticide mixes. The application timing is not optimal for the best use of all of these products. In the long run, the initial convenience offered may cost you more in time and money. If your lawn is between 40% and 60% weeds, with heavy insect pressures, you are past the point of control. It's time to think about starting over. Removal of all of the vegetation, reconditioning the soil, and re-seeding may be the most satisfying, and in the long run least costly, method of getting weeds under control.

If the soil under your turf is compacted, core aeration should be done during an active stage of growth, early fall or late spring. This aeration process cuts and removes cores of soil to a depth of roughly 3". This removal leaves perforations in the soil profile which will allow the roots to expand and air, water and nutrients to penetrate more easily. The cores should be left on the soil surface to break down through mowing, rain and general traffic. Over time this process may help to fill in minor differences in soil level.

Keeping turf healthy and beautiful is an enjoyable process for many people. For others, it is an unwelcome task. Whatever your viewpoint, review the time you want to devote to it and take an honest look at what you expect out of it. If you improve your management practices based on your expectations, the lawn will respond in kind. Be patient. It will come around, just give it a season or two.