# Home Lawn Care Programs That Work

**Another Report on Effective Turf Maintenance from the Lawn Institute**

Having one of the best-looking and environmentally sound lawns in your neighborhood can be accomplished easier than you may think. You may still encounter some lawn "problems" during the year, but you can reduce their probability by faithfully following the lawn care programs outlined in this brochure. There are three (3) key parts to a good lawn maintenance program:

- **Mowing**
- **Fertilizing**
- **Watering**

They all work together to produce a quality lawn. Leaving one part out, or not following the plan to its optimum level, will give you less than the desired results.

## A Mowing Program That Works

Many lawn care experts believe that a majority of our lawn care problems are a result of not mowing at the proper height…and not keeping our lawn mower blade sharpened throughout the mowing season. Each type of grass has its specific height for optimum performance. Mowing to keep the grass at its best growing height will increase your lawn's density and attractiveness, and reduce lawn care problems.

No matter the kind of grass you have, there is a simple "rule of thumb" to follow when mowing your lawn. **Never remove more than one-third (1/3) of the leaf surface each time you mow.** Leaf surface, or cutting height, refers to the length of grass above the soil. Cutting below the optimum height impedes root development, which is key to having a dense, healthy lawn. Use the following chart to determine the best growing height for your kind of grass and when to mow it again.

| Type Of Grass | Best Mowing Height | Mow When It Reaches |
|---|---|---|

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Bluegrass | 2 inches | 3 inches |
| Perennial ryegrass | 2 inches | 3 inches |
| Tall fescue | 2 inches | 3 inches |
| Fine fescue | 2 inches | 3 inches |
| St. Augustine | 2 inches | 3 inches |
| Buffalograss | 2 inches | 3 inches |
| Bermuda | 1.5 inches | 2.25 inches |
| Zoysia | 1.5 inches | 2.25 inches |
| Centipede | 1.5 inches | 2.25 inches |

**Note:** Increase the mowing height 1/2 inch for shady areas, immediately following a drought period, or when the grass has been weakened by insect injury or high traffic.

If you follow the "rule of thumb" on maintaining the optimum height and cut no more than 1/3 of the leaf surface, you can determine your cutting frequency. So much depends on weather conditions, when you've fertilized, and the amount of water the lawn has received. And remember - *keep that lawn mower blade sharp!* A dull blade will cause injury to the grass plant and produce stress…and increase the possibility of insect and disease problems.

When you use the "rule of thumb," you don't have to collect the grass clippings. They decompose quickly and put nutrients back into the soil. It's a built-in fertilization program every time you mow.

*No - grass clippings do not create thatch!* That's an old myth! Leaving the clippings on the lawn keeps them out of the landfills…and that's another environmental benefit!

As a last note, there are a number of new "mulching" mowers on the market that cut the clippings into very small pieces, which allows for quicker decay. These are not absolutely necessary to a proper mowing maintenance program, but if you're in the market for a new lawn mower, you should consider a mulching mower.

## A Fertilization Program That Works

The goal of any fertilization program is to provide the lawn with the nutrients it needs for optimum growth. The most accurate way to find out those needs is to have the soil tested. Soil test kits and instructions are usually available at lawn and garden centers, and at better hardware stores. Soil test services and information are often available through your local County Extension office. If a soil test is not conducted, follow these general fertilization guidelines.

Most lawn experts agree that fertilizers with N (Nitrogen), P (Phosphorus), and K (Potassium) analysis ratios of 3-1-2 or 4-1-2 are acceptable for use on any lawn. Examples on the fertilizer bag that fit these ratios are: 12-4-8, 15-5-10, 21-7-14, 16-4-8,

and 20-5-10. The experts also recommend that the fertilizer should have at least one-half of its Nitrogen (N) in a slowly soluble/slow-release form, i.e. natural organics, sulfur-coated urea, resin-coated urea, ureaformaldehyde, methylene urea, or I.B.D.U. Lawns fertilized with one of these slow-release forms of nitrogen tend to have better color, thickness, and reduced leaf growth.

Fertilizer application rates should be as low as possible and still produce a high quality lawn. If the amount of nitrogen (N-the first number of the analysis on the bag) is between 5 and 12, then the application rate should be 8 pounds per 1,000 square feet of lawn. If the number is between 12 and 18, the rate of application should be 6 pounds per 1,000 square feel. Anything over 19 should be applied at 4 pounds per 1,000 square feel of lawn. This is a good "rule of thumb," but always apply the fertilizer at the recommended rate listed on the bag.

The best time to fertilize your lawn is when it's actively growing and in need of nutrients. For Southern lawns, this means beginning the program just after spring green-up and stopping about two months before the average frost date in the fall. For Northern lawns, begin the program as the lawn begins to grow and green-up in the spring, then reduce applications as the weather gets hotter. When the cool weather returns in the fall, the lawn can again be fertilized. A late fall application, after the first frost, has been shown to increase lawn quality the following spring.

Fertilizer application dates and frequency are based primarily on which form of nitrogen the fertilizer contains. Those that have at least one-half of its nitrogen in slow-release form should be adequate for 6 to 8 weeks. If the lawn still has good color and is growing well at the end of this period, then delay the next fertilizer application a little longer.

Also, if you leave your clippings on the lawn, you are fertilizing the lawn almost on a continual basis…possibly extending the time period between commercially manufactured fertilizer applications. Lawn fertilization is truly the case of a little occasionally is good, but a lot at one time is bad for the grass.

## A Watering Program That Works

The best lawns grow when they are watered heavily at **infrequent** intervals. On an average, the lawn needs about 1 inch of water a week, either from rain or irrigation during the growing season. This one-inch of water will normally soak the soil to a depth of 4 to 6 inches, which allows the water to reach deep into the root system.

Soil types vary in the speed at which water will soak in. If you know your basic soil type, use the following table as a general guide to watering.

| Soil Type | Infiltration Per Hour | Time Required For 1 Inch To Soak In |
|---|---|---|
| Sand | 2.0 inches | 0.5 hours |
| Sandy loam | 1.0 inches | 1.0 hours |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Loam | 0.5 inches | 2.0 hours |
| Silt loam | 0.4 inches | 2.25 hours |
| Clay loam | 0.3 inches | 3.3 hours |
| Clay | 0.2 inches | 5.0 hours |

You must determine the rate of application of your sprinkler system to set up any irrigation program. An easy way to do this is to set out a series of straight-sided, flat-bottom cans if you have an underground sprinkler system or a couple of cans if you use a single sprinkler. Run the system 30 minutes and measure the water in the cans. With a little simple math, you can determine the length of time to apply one inch of water.

Watch for runoff during the watering period. It is very possible that your lawn will not be able to soak up the water as fast as your sprinkler is putting it on the lawn. If this occurs, shut it off and wait on-half hour, then turn it on again. Also, remember that sloped areas will have more tendency for runoff.

The best times to water your lawn are in the early morning or early evening when there is generally less wind and heat. The lease desirable times are in the heat of the afternoon, when water evaporates too quickly, and very late in the evening, which can cause the lawn to stay wet all night. This encourages disease development.

Over-watering is much worse than under-watering. Most grasses can live through reasonably long periods of drought. Water only when the soil is dry 4 to 6 inches below the surface. Use a screwdriver or other probe to determine dryness. Also, if the grass doesn't spring back up after walking on it…it's probably time to put another inch of water on the lawn.

**The Lawn Institute**
**1855-A Hicks Road**
**Rolling Meadows, IL 60008**

**Back to Main Brochure Page**