

Spring Lawn Care

br Debbie Lauer, Bell County Master Gardener

March is almost here. With it will come warmer weather and the beginning of caring for your lawn. I know, I know, mowing again, UGH! Well what can I say? If you grow grass you have to mow it, water it, and fertilize it. While I know that you are anxious to get out there and be the first on the block to have a beautiful deep green lawn, have some patience, treat your grass right and it will also look good in August and September.

First you must remember that our last average frost date is around the 10th of March. Also keep in mind that we can have a hard freeze after that. While the "window" for the first application of fertilizer is March and April for this part of Texas, here is some advice to help you decide when the time is right. You certainly do not want to fertilize too early, have it start to green up and then have another freeze happen. So you should NEVER fertilize your yard to "make" it green up. Let it begin to grow (break dormancy) on its own.

Once your grass starts to grow and needs mowing, set your mower on the lowest setting and scalp it. Yes, you read that right. For the first mowing of the season scalp it (DO NOT SCALP BUFFALOGRASS). Don't ever scalp your grass again until next spring. Now rake up the grass and any excess dead stuff left over from the year before. If you have St. Augustine grass, do not pull up living runners. What you are trying to do here is get rid of excess dead material to avoid thatch problems later in the year. After the first mowing, cut your grass at the lowest height recommended for your type of grass until it gets hot, and then raise the blade. For St. Augustine and Buffalograss 2.5 inches, for Bermudas and Zoysia grasses 1 inch are the lowest recommended heights.

After you have mowed twice, THEN you can put down the first application of fertilizer for the year. This day will depend on temperature and how much water the grass gets, but is usually late March to early April. Now that you know when, how much fertilizer should you put down? If you have not had a soil analysis done; use a 3-1-2 (such as a 15-5-10) fertilizer. Never put down more than 1 pound of Nitrogen per 1000 square feet at a time. The Texas A&M University Turfgrass Program has a fertilizer calculator to help you figure out how much fertilizer equates to 1 pound of Nitrogen. You can also go to the Extension Office in Belton and ask for the Nitrogen Fertilizer Calculations "Cheat Sheet", number SCS-1998-10.

Mowing frequency is the most important factor in encouraging your turf to grow quickly and thickly during this time of the year. Never let the grass get more than 1/3 taller than the height recommend above. This means mowing often at the right height.

Ensuring that your turf receives enough water is also very important during this time of the year. During the spring, turf needs about one inch of water a week. If it doesn't rain enough you must start irrigation. Don't let it get dried out but don't drown it either. Our clay soils absorb water slowly so that is how you should apply it to your turf. Water infrequently and deeply (and slowly).

Clay also has a tendency to compact over time, especially under high traffic areas in the yard. Soil compaction is a serious problem as grass roots cannot penetrate to the depths needed to survive our hot summers. It can also prevent oxygen and water from reaching established roots. Core aeration is the solution and spring is the best time to aerate it. Core aeration creates holes in the turf and loosens the soil allowing roots, water, and air to penetrate the soil more deeply. After aeration a light application of compost (¼ to ½ inch) raked in, will kick start the microbes in your soil which will also help get your grass off to a great start.

Many people worry about weeds. If you grow a thick healthy turf most weeds will be choked out. Weed seeds are always present. To prevent their germination consider using a pre-emergent weed control product. Which ever product you choose you must get it on the turf before the weeds germinate this means late February to late March depending on weather conditions.

Mowing, watering, and fertilizing properly are key to getting your grass off to a healthy start. Spend time on it in the spring and it will be healthy and well established when the punishing heat starts.

