

Basic Fall Lawn Care

August 28, 1998

This is the time of the year when most lawns appear to be tired and struggling to maintain some semblance of a decent appearance. Our cool-season turfgrass varieties do not perform well during the heat of the August sun and, combined with the lack of consistent moisture, the turf regresses into a torpor-like state. However, the cooler conditions of September are just around the corner and your lawn will begin its fall rebound within the next 2-3 weeks. So it is best to take some basic maintenance steps now to ensure that the turfgrass is prepared for winter.

First, remove those obvious patches of weeds that have taken a hold during the last few weeks. Weeding a lawn or garden this time of year is akin to making a payment on the principal portion of a loan - for each weed removed before the seeds mature and disperse, there will be less interest to pay on the loan in the future. Crabgrass, plantain and chickweed, to name just a few, are maturing and setting seed now and it is time well spent to dispose of these invaders before a new crop of their seeds are laid down.

Second, spot seed any bare or thin areas. Early to mid-September is the best time to start grass from seed because the cool weather and generally moist conditions will rapidly promote good growth and root development.

For maximum turfgrass health and vigor, fall fertilization is a key management practice as it will increase root and rhizome development, improve nutrient storage before winter dormancy occurs, and generally strengthen the ability of the turfgrass to compete against weeds next year. When selecting a fall lawn fertilizer, the two most important considerations are a) assessing the existing nutrient levels in the turf bed, and b) finding a fertilizer with the proper content of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) to complement your conditions.

While most of us recognize the importance of nitrogen to plants, including turfgrass, the primary objective of fall turf fertilization is to stimulate root health and not to stimulate the

above ground growth. Therefore, only a moderate amount of nitrogen (not to exceed 1 lb. per 1,000 sq. ft.) should be applied late in the growing season (between September 1 and October 1).

The second and third elements listed on a fertilizer package, phosphorus and potassium, are critical physiological nutrients for plants because they foster the stimulation of root growth, and the synthesis of organic compounds, such as sugars, starches and proteins. However, like excess nitrogen, excess phosphorus is now recognized as harmful to the environment if it leaches into surface waters, as it quickly upsets the nutrient balance and spurs unwanted growth of aquatic organisms. And although a surfeit of soil potassium is not directly connected to any known harmful environmental conditions, the application of a surplus amount is not justifiable, either biologically or financially.

Therefore, if you have had a nutrient analysis performed on the soil from your lawn within the last 1-3 years, follow the fertilization recommendations that accompanied the test report. But if you haven't had the soil tested within that time frame, now is the time to submit a sample or two for analysis. The results will take the guesswork out of selecting the correct amount and type of fertilizer and lime to apply this fall. ☀ 082898



Nobody ever drowned in his own sweat.

Ann Landers