

Tips for a Healthy Lawn

Our Water - Our World Fact Sheet (www.ourwaterourworld.org)

Lawns can look beautiful without using pesticides and fertilizers that may contribute to water quality problems in a local creek, the Bay or Delta. The tips below will help you maintain a healthy and beautiful lawn that can out-compete weeds and other lawn pests.

Irrigate An Established Lawn Properly

- Before you irrigate, check the soil moisture with a soil probe or trowel. The top 2-3 inches should feel almost dry before you add more water.
- After watering, test for water penetration again with the soil probe or trowel. Push a trowel into the soil and tilt it forward. If the soil isn't wet 4-6 inches down, continue watering until it is. Grass roots will grow deeper and the lawn will be healthier. Track the watering time so you know about how long to water.
- Irrigate slowly so that water doesn't run off. Over watering is wasteful and can wash pesticides and fertilizers into the storm drains.
- If water runs off or pools even with slow irrigation, soil compaction may be a problem.
- Clay soils hold more moisture and dry out more slowly, thus they may need less frequent irrigation.
- Sandy soils dry out more quickly and may need more frequent irrigation.

Feed Your Soil By Leaving Grass Clippings on the Lawn

- Grass clippings can provide most of the nutrients needed by a lawn if the clippings are small enough to decompose quickly without forming mats on top of the living grass. Remove only 1/3 of the blade at any one time.
- To decompose clippings, soil must be biologically active, i.e., contain bacteria, fungi, insects, worms, and oxygen. Soil under a lawn that has been heavily fertilized or frequently treated with pesticides may be deficient in these elements.

Mow the Right Way

- Remove no more than 1/3 of the leaf blade at one cutting. Removing more can be very stressful for the plant and increase pest and disease problems.
- Mow when the grass is dry.
- During the summer months, cut the grass higher to help retain soil moisture.
- Keep mower blades sharp. Dull blades wound the grass and make it more vulnerable to pests and diseases.
- Alternate your mowing pattern frequently to avoid compacted ruts.
- If rust disease is present in your lawn, clean your mower between mowings to prevent spreading the disease.

Deal Sensibly with Weeds

- Decide how many weeds you can tolerate. It is not realistic to expect a completely weed-free lawn.
- Dig up weeds by hand and sprinkle grass seed on any bare spots so weeds can't fill in. Water regularly with a fine spray until the grass sprouts.
- Keep grass growing vigorously to crowd out weeds. Don't mow grass too short; taller blades can shade the soil enough to prevent some weed seeds from germinating.
- Use corn gluten meal to prevent certain broad leaf weeds from germinating. Apply in spring or fall a few weeks before annual weeds begin to germinate.

Lawn Aeration

- Aerate spots where you can't push a screwdriver five to six inches into the soil, where water pools, where grass looks thin, or where there is heavy traffic.
- Use a hollow-tined aerator that removes plugs of soil, either a foot operated or motorized model.
- Irrigate deeply (soil should be moist 5-6 inches down) so you can push the aerator into the soil as far as possible. Allow soil to dry slightly before you begin.
- Leave the plugs on the lawn and break them up with a garden rake.

Dethatching Lawns

- Thatch is dead and dying, matted grass parts that accumulate on top of the soil. Thatch prevents air, water, and fertilizer from reaching the soil.
- Remove thatch with a rake if more than 1/2 inch thick.
- Aeration can help prevent thatch buildup.
- When soil is biologically active, grass clippings decompose and do not contribute to thatch buildup. This is a good reason to minimize or eliminate the use of broad-spectrum pesticides that can destroy soil organisms.

Fertilizing

- Unless the soil texture is sandy, nutrient deficiencies are unlikely and you may not need to fertilize at all. If in doubt, have your soil professionally tested.
- Grass clippings left on the lawn can provide most of the fertilizer.
- If you need to fertilize, use organic lawn fertilizers or slow-release fertilizers, such as sulfur- or polymer-coated urea. These products release nutrients slowly over a longer period, allowing the grass to absorb nutrients more efficiently.
- Fertilizers, if misapplied, can kill soil life and ruin soil structure in even the best soils.

Lawn Substitutes

Americans spend a great deal of time on their lawns, using an abundance of water, fertilizer, pesticides, and time. If a grass surface is not required, consider replacing all or some of your lawn with an attractive alternative. The following plants require little water and will accept occasional foot traffic:

- Woolly Yarrow (*Achillea tomentosa*) - Plant from flats or small pots, 6 inches apart; mow in March and July to a height of 2 inches. Yellow flowers. Keep soil on the dry side.
- Caraway-Scented Thyme (*Thymus herba-barona*) - Plant all thymes from flats or small pots, 6-8 inches apart. Mowing is not necessary. Rose-pink flowers in early summer attract bees.
- Creeping Thyme (*Thymus praecoxarcticus*) - Mow to 1-1/2 inches in July and fertilize; purple flowers in summer attract bees.
- Strawberry Clover (*Trifolium fragiferum*) - Plant from seed in fall; mow to 2 inches in April, June, August; white to pink flowers in summer attract bees.
- Garden Chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*) combined with strawberry clover - Plant chamomile from flats or from small pots, 6-8 inches apart. Plant strawberry clover as noted above and mow both ground covers to 2 inches in April, June, and August. In areas with serious drainage problems, chamomile may not grow. In those spots, combine the clover with either of the thymes listed above.