

Watering the Lawn

Excerpt from Building a Healthy Lawn, by Stuart Franklin

Water is even more important to grass plants than it is to human beings. Like people, plants are mostly water. But unlike people, grass plants have to take in almost all their nutrients dissolved in water. Without enough water in the soil, a lawn can't get the nutrients it needs for food production, growth, defense, and reproduction. It becomes a weak group of plants, easy prey for insects and disease. If there is too much water in the soil, on the other hand, the plants can drown. Again, we seek to maintain a balance.

Good soils hold water like a sponge, but allow the excess to drain off. Poorer, sandier soils barely hold water at all. Clay soils absorb water very slowly, but seem to stay wet forever once the water penetrates. These soil types are discussed thoroughly in chapter 5. For now it's enough to know that your soil type and the amount of rainfall you get will influence the amount of watering you must do.

Water Wisely

Just as there is no exact formula for mowing, there is no perfect formula for watering. Sandy soils need more water; rich organic soils need less. Wind, heat, evaporation, shade, and length of grass blade all affect your lawn's water needs. Many people with healthy lawns don't even bother to water. They allow the grass to go dormant, and it comes back to life when conditions are right.

Paul Voykin, in his book *Ask the Lawn Expert*, argues that in the cool-weather states you can hold back on watering a healthy lawn that is kept 2-1/2 inches or higher until late June. Then, once every seven to ten days, if there hasn't been a good rain, you should water deeply. I heartily agree. High grass blades will permit deeper roots, which means less watering.

A short-mowed lawn means a shallow root system and a demand for constant watering. Persistently moist soil surfaces create ideal conditions for shallow-rooted weeds (such as crabgrass), bent grass, fungus, and various lawn diseases. On either a tall or a short lawn, too much water is trouble.

When to Water

Begin watering your lawn when the soil has dried out well into the root zone. The higher-mown lawns should have deeper roots, so you can let them dry out more deeply between waterings.

Many factors determine how fast your soil dries out. You should encourage the roots to probe deeper from too little water. There is a fine line here. If the grass takes on a slightly bluish tint, or starts to show your footprints after you've walked over it, it is beginning to wilt. This means it is time either to water or to let the grass go dormant. If you want to, you can slice into the soil to see if the roots are moist or not.

Once you decide to water, make sure you water deeply. Water every week to ten days if you have a healthy lawn in a soil that holds water, and if there has been no substantial rain during that time. On sandy soils you might have to water twice as often.