

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



February 25, 2023

Maintaining the Lawn Begins in Late Winter

With the warmer weather in February, the lawn is beginning to turn green. As the lawn mowing season begins, using best practices to maintain the lawn protects the environment, uses resources wisely, and promotes a healthy lawn.

Fertilizer seems to come to mind in the spring but actually, fertilizing the lawn in the fall is best. Fall is the best time because the roots still grow and develop. In turn, the lawn becomes very dense and crowds out spring weeds. Nitrogen applied in mid-spring causes problems. It results in excessive grass growth. No more than one-third to one-half of the leaf blade should be removed at one time. Therefore, the lawn needs to be mowed often during the week to remove the recommended length at each mowing. Removing too much leaf tissue at one time decreases spring root growth and summer drought tolerance as well as increases weed and disease problems.

Before starting to mow, make sure the mower blade is sharp. A dull blade tears the leaves making the lawn look ragged, increasing its susceptibility to invasion by a disease, and raising mower fuel usage. For best results, sharpen the blade four to six times per year.

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The recommended mowing height for tall fescue is 2 to 3 inches, and for Kentucky bluegrass is 2 to 2.5 inches. Mowing at the best height for the grass encourages a deeper root system, which helps protect your lawn against drought and weeds.

If the mower has a fixed, all-year height, set it at 2.5 inches. However, if you can easily vary the height, set it at 1.5 to 2 inches for the first several mowing times. The shorter mowing height removes a lot of winter-burned, brown leaves. Exposing more dark green growth transforms the lawn into the most uniform, attractive one in the neighborhood. Move the height up to 2.5 inches after you mow the grass several times.

When summer arrives, protect your grass from summer heat and drought injury by raising the mower height to 3 or 3.5 inches. However, remember that extra high grass, especially tall fescue, tends to fall over and mat down during hot summer weather causing increased summer disease problems.

Remember to mow often so that only one-third of the grass blade is removed at any one time. During the spring, the lawn may need to be mowed more than once a week. Mowing off more than 50 percent of the leaves at one time causes scalping, resulting in increased weed competition and in the death of some grass plants during the hot summer.

When mowing the lawn, leave the clippings on the lawn. This saves time, money, and energy since you don't have to stop and empty the bagger or buy trash bags. Clippings add free fertilizer to the lawn, possibly as much as 25 percent of the lawn's annual nutrient needs.

Remember, grass clippings are not accepted in the garbage.

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Grass clippings do not increase thatch. Clippings contain 75 to 85 percent water and decompose quickly. Thatch is a tight, intermingled organic layer of dead and living shoots, stems, and roots that develops between the green leaves and soil surface. About a half-inch of thatch is normal. It helps moderate temperature extremes at the soil surface and provides a cushion effect. A lawn of tall fescue grass generally does not have a serious thatch problem.

Grass clippings decompose quicker if the clippings are short. While a mulching mower or blade is not necessary, it does cut or shred the leaves into small fragments.

Collecting grass clippings may be necessary when the grass is tall and normal mowing tends to windrow the clippings, causing smothering of the grass underneath. The collected clippings can be used as mulch around ornamentals and between garden rows to a depth of 1 inch. Do not mulch with clippings from lawns that were herbicide treated to control weeds.

Early spring or fall is a good time to aerify a lawn if the soil is compacted. The soil is considered compacted if you are not able to push a pocket knife blade into moist soil. Plugs of soil must be removed to be a benefit. As a note, most lawns do not require aerification because there is not enough traffic to compact the soil according to Extension Specialists in Turf Science.

For more information about lawn management tips, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

Annette's Tips:

As a heads-up, a pre-emergence herbicide needs to be applied before crabgrass seeds germinate. A rule of thumb is to make sure the pre-emergence herbicide is applied by the time the forsythia shrub begins to drop its yellow blooms. For western Kentucky, this may be around

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April 1. Try to use a pre-emergence crabgrass preventer without nitrogen. Read and follow label directions. Only herbicides specific for crabgrass prevention can be used when seeding a new lawn without damaging the seedlings. Do not apply the herbicide before heavy rain because it may wash away and be carried off target.

Mid-March to mid-April is a good time for you to treat your valuable ash trees with a DBH of 20 inches or less to prevent damage by the emerald ash borer. The treatment involves a soil drench containing the active ingredient imidacloprid. Larger trees need to be treated professionally. This borer has been found in Daviess County. A “Managing Emerald Ash Borer: Decision Guide” publication is available at https://extension.entm.purdue.edu/EAB/PDF/NABB_DecisionGuide.pdf or at a UK Extension office.

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