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and practicing weed control can be integrated into the same chore – if you play your cards right!

First, disabuse yourself of any notion you may have that grass is simply grass, and that's all there is to it.

So why do some yards exhibit beautiful green lawns while in others the greenery always seems to be losing out to encroaching brown spots – rather like a human head of hair succumbing to graying? In a nutshell, all else being the same, the secret of having a green lawn lies in providing sufficient nutrients, practicing effective weed control and following the proper mowing regimen. Of course, the devil is in the details. But let me begin by elaborating on that ominous-sounding little clause, “all else being the same.” For it's important to start on an even playing field.

First, disabuse yourself of any notion you may have that grass is simply grass, and that's all there is to it. In fact, there's a lot more to it than that. People grow many different types of grasses in their lawns and these grasses have different growing requirements. Many factors go into the selection of a type of grass for a particular lawn.

One of the overriding factors is your local climate. The so-called “warm-season” grasses are ideal for the southernmost states in the U.S., whereas “cool-season” grasses predominate in the North and in Canada. Note, too, that lawns are not always composed of just one type of grass, but rather of a mixture, to take advantage of the strengths of each type.

Shady areas are notorious obstacles to having green lawns. Among cool-season grasses, fine fescues are the most

## Tips for Growing Green Lawns

By David Beaulieu

**IS THE GRASS ALWAYS GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE?** Whenever you looked at your neighbor's yard last summer, perhaps you couldn't help but think, “The grass is always greener on the other side.” Well, don't despair. I have some tips for growing green lawns, including the proper use of lawn fertilizers that will make it easy for you to gain some respect for your own grass. Of course,

assuming that it is only green grass – and grass of good pedigree – which you wish to see carpeting your yard in emerald splendor, weed control is necessarily a part of any collection of tips for growing green lawns. Most homeowners intent on having green lawns will tolerate nary a dandelion weed nor tuft of crabgrass, regardless of its greenery.

Fortunately, applying lawn fertilizers



tolerant of shade. Lawn areas with heavy foot traffic require a tough grass. A mix of Kentucky bluegrass and perennial rye will fill the bill here.

Some regions, like ours, are more prone to drought than others. The new, improved strains of Kentucky bluegrass are relatively drought-tolerant.

But, in addition to grass-type selection, there are other factors to consider ensuring that you start with a level playing field as you strive to unseat your neighbor for “green lawn” bragging rights.

### WATERING LAWNS

So you're intent on growing grass that stays green? Well, in addition to selecting the right type of grass for your yard, two more preliminary questions focus on lawn thatch and the proper amount of water a lawn requires.

What's the yearly rainfall to be expected in your region? In dry climates, installing an irrigation system is practically *de rigueur* for growing grass successfully. Meanwhile, in the misty Pacific Northwest, it is understandable that many choose to entrust watering lawns to Mother Nature. For most of the rest of us, the decision of whether or not to have an irrigation system for watering lawns will not be so clear-cut. Cost will be a consideration, but keep in mind, in the long run, an automatic irrigation

system may save you money.

One way or the other, your grass must have sufficient water on a consistent schedule in order for you to achieve the goal of a lush green lawn. If your neighbors are watering lawns with an automatic irrigation system – and you aren't – you're not starting out with an even playing field.

Local water restrictions are also a consideration for making a decision to install an irrigation system. Last summer's drought brought severe water restrictions regarding day of week and time of day residents were permitted to water their lawns. An irrigation system made adhering to those restrictions much easier.

### LAWN THATCH: NEMESIS OF GROWING GRASS WELL

Finally, check that your grass isn't saddled with lawn thatch: If your lawn thatch layer is  $\frac{1}{2}$ " or less, you may proceed to the “What to do with Grass Clippings” section.

However, much of your effort in implementing the tips supplied in the “What to do with Grass Clippings” section will go for naught, unless you first de-thatch (i.e., remove lawn thatch) from a yard with lawn thatch build-up that exceeds approximately  $\frac{1}{2}$ ". If you fail to de-thatch, you're not starting out with an even playing field. Why? Because

the lawn thatch layer will prevent water from getting to the roots of your grass, effectively nullifying efforts at watering lawns faithfully. And, because the lawn thatch layer also furnishes cover for unwanted insect pests.

If your lawn thatch build-up is right around  $\frac{1}{2}$ ", you have a minor lawn thatch problem. But if your lawn thatch layer is, say,  $\frac{3}{4}$ " or more, you have a major lawn thatch problem, for which you'll need the aid of a vertical mower. Vertical mowers can be rented from your local rental center.

### APPLYING LAWN FERTILIZERS

It is now time to get to the heart of the matter. The secret of having a green lawn lies in providing sufficient nutrients (lawn fertilizers), practicing effective lawn weed control and following the proper mowing regimen. It is sometimes possible to apply lawn fertilizers and practice weed control simultaneously.

### LAWN FERTILIZERS AND WEED CONTROL

We know we have to fertilize the tomato plants in our gardens or the houseplants on our window sills. But it's easy to overlook the necessity of spreading lawn fertilizers over our grass.

Perhaps it is because the individual grass plants toil in anonymity, forming, en masse, an entity we know as “the

lawn.” We tend to take the grass in our yards for granted, as if it’s just supposed to be there – an outdoor carpet that just gets a trim every once in awhile. But it would be more accurate to think in terms of millions of individual plants craving periodic feedings.

It is best to meet this need for periodic feedings by using lawn fertilizers that are “slow-release” in nature. Because these lawn fertilizers release their nutrients over time, rather than all at once, you’re essentially stretching out the feeding. As nutrients are released, the root system of your grass fills in any bare patches. This in itself promotes lawn weed control, depriving weed seeds of a place to germinate. But in addition, there are lawn fertilizers that promote lawn weed control at the same time. Effective lawn weed control should, after all, go hand-in-hand with the application of lawn fertilizers: if the weeds suck up some of the nutrients that you’re supplying, those are nutrients being wasted, as they are not going to your grass.

Before buying any lawn fertilizers read the instructions on the bag carefully (or

ask someone at the store for details). A particular product may not be suitable for your type of grass. Likewise, when applying lawn fertilizers, follow directions explicitly, concerning how much to apply, how often they should be applied and under what conditions they should be applied.

Before buying any lawn fertilizers read the instructions on the bag carefully as it may not be suitable for your type of grass.

Lawn fertilizers are best applied with spreaders. Be advised not to fill the applicator with the spreader parked on the lawn. Doing so invites grass-burn, as you may accidentally discharge too much while loading. Instead, fill the applicator somewhere else, then wheel the spreader onto the lawn.

## MOWING TIPS ON “THE CUTTING EDGE:” WHEN AND HOW TO MOW

“The cutting edge:” Be sure to keep lawnmower blades sharp. Sharp lawnmower blades produce clean cuts and clean cuts promote better grass health. Dull lawnmower blades, by contrast, produce rougher cuts that make the grass more susceptible to disease.

When to mow: It puts less stress on the lawn to mow in the evening than to mow when the sun is pounding down on the lawn in the afternoon.

How to mow: Alternate the direction in which you mow each lawn mowing session. Using this mowing tip, you will prevent your grass from “getting into a rut” (literally). If your lawnmower wheels pass over the same area in the same direction each time you mow, they’ll form ruts over time.

I hope these tips help in your efforts to create the lawn that is the envy of your neighborhood.

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