

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
Date: Aug. 13, 2006  
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The warm weather and the return of sunny days tends to make us use our lawns more frequently and to appreciate the contribution they make to the garden. This is a good time to assess how well the lawn is doing and begin a good maintenance program. Lawn care, like all gardening, requires ongoing effort but the results can be a home surrounded by natural beauty.

Proper fertilizing, watering, mowing and de-thatching when needed, should result in a healthy lawn. A healthy lawn is more likely to withstand weed and pest assaults and less likely to require constant renovation. Designing a program of lawn care requires the gardener to look carefully at the lawn and if possible, have a soil test done. Looking at the lawn will determine if there are weeds present, if there are dead spots or high or low areas that may collect water or be stripped during mowing. A soil test can save money in fertilizer costs and prevent over or under fertilizing. Contact the WSU Master Gardeners through your WSU/Skagit Co. Extension office (350-428-4270) for more information about soil testing.

Mowing height affects both appearance and the life span of a lawn. A mower that mulches lawn clippings is recommended in Western Washington as the mulch actually feeds the lawn. Thatch will accumulate only when the weather is cool and wet, so summer mulching is recommended. Set the mower height so that no more than one-third of a leaf blade is cut. At the height of the growing season, it may be necessary to mow twice a week.

Over-watering can be harmful to a lawn since nutrients are leached away and wet soil causes roots to seek oxygen at the surface. By observation and feel, a gardener can determine if water is needed. Look carefully and frequently at the grass. A bluish-green color shows lack of water. Failure of the grass to spring back when pressed down also indicates a need for water. Checking the soil by hand at the roots for drying indicates the watering need. When it is time to water follow these general rules: only apply enough water to wet the root zone, apply water slowly to maximize absorption and prevent run-off, apply water early in the morning to prevent mildew and other diseases.

To thrive, lawns need good nutrition. The best way and the most economical way to determine what nutrition a lawn needs is to have a soil test done. Over feeding is harmful and expensive so it is recommended that lawns be fed only what they need. Nitrogen may be the only nutrient that a lawn needs and to determine this, a soil test is necessary. Other common nutrients that lawns may need are phosphorous, potassium and lime. Lime does not remove moss but does supply calcium.

When it has been determined what nutrients are needed, apply accordingly. For lawns requiring nitrogen, apply one pound for every one thousand square feet four times a year: May 1, mid June, mid September and late November. The exceptions to this are Kentucky bluegrass and perennial rye grass. These two cultivars require six pounds for every 1000 square feet. Do not fertilize in hot weather as nitrogen can burn. A fertilizing program that is specific to the needs of a lawn produces the healthiest outcome.

Thatch build-up is only harmful when it exceeds three-quarters of an inch. Thatch of one half an inch or less is beneficial and should be left in place. Check the depth of

the thatch by parting the blades of grass. If thatch is too deep, remove the thatch with a power rake as it is very hard work by hand. Thatch can be prevented by mowing at the proper height, infrequent and thorough watering, and a good fertilization program.

Weed control is also enhanced by having a healthy lawn that doesn't allow weeds to germinate and grow. In small areas, hand control weeds if possible by digging out. If weeds do become a problem the first step is to identify what they are. The WSU Master Gardeners can also help you with this. Then choose a selective herbicide to apply according to the directions printed on the container. Mid-spring and mid-autumn are the best times to apply herbicides. Never apply selective herbicides when the temperature is likely to reach eighty degrees and when the wind is greater than three miles per hour. Read the instructions carefully, as herbicides can harm other plants and beneficial insects. In small areas, hand control weeds if possible by digging out.

A beautiful lawn is desirable and possible. An ongoing program of mowing, fertilizing and watering can reduce thatch, pests and weeds and can save money and time. For more info see EB 0482 Home Lawns ([www.pubs.wsu.edu](http://www.pubs.wsu.edu))

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

