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TEN STEPS TO A GOOD LAWN

by W. H. Daniel, Extension Agronomist

Few areas of the homeowner's maintenance chores demand as much time and attention as lawn care. A neatly-kept, healthy, green lawn can be a lovely asset to the home. If you follow a continuing lawn-care program, it can be achieved with a minimum of effort and expense.

These ten steps to a good lawn have evolved from more than two decades of turf studies. Each step leads to its successor, and they are all based on a single, vital factor—a good, rich soil for adequate moisture and nutrient storage.

If you are a real lawn enthusiast, you may be interested in following all ten steps. Other, less involved persons may be interested in just the first few. However, each builds upon the other, and you can, by following those that are applicable to your own situation, devise a good program of lawn care.

The steps are:
1. Use adapted grasses.
2. Mow regularly.
3. Fertilize at least twice.
5. Irrigate to maintain growth.
6. Reduce competition from crabgrass.
7. Prevent insect damage.
8. Make room for new leaves by removing thatch.
9. Protect from diseases.
10. Kill patches of undesirable grasses.

Step 1. Use adapted grasses

Bluegrasses are favorites in the Midwest. Common, Delta Glade, Park, Adelphi, Baron, Merion, Victa and Wabash bluegrass varieties may be blended for greater disease resistance and longer vigor. Often redtop or ryegrass are added for early growth. Red fescue may also be added for shade. Always buy good quality seed, based on purity (freedom from weed seeds) and bluegrass percentages. Zoysia may provide a dense cover on doughty soils in sunny areas in the southern portion of Indiana.

Step 2. Mow regularly at correct height

At a two-inch height, bluegrass lawns will withstand disease damage and weed competition better than if cut more closely. The newer, more disease-resistant varieties can be cut at 1-1½ inches. Bent, Zoysia and Bermuda grass should be cut to less than one inch. Sharpen your mower blades monthly.

Step 3. Fertilize two or more times annually

Your lawn is a mixture of dead, dying and growing blades of grass and you want to keep the green ones predominant. This means feeding the lawn at least twice a year, using a fertilizer that is high in nitrogen, low in phosphorous and medium in potassium content, such as 16-8-8, 12-4-8, 19-5-9, 24-4-12 and 30-3-10 mixtures.

Many lawn fertilizers today are non-burning, slow release, lightweight, granular types. These can be applied any time the grass leaves are dry without damage. But, for safety in areas where there is wear on the turf, and for quick response, water immediately.

Step 4. Kill broadleaf weeds

Treat any time, but the best time is mid-fall. Use the amine form of 2,4-D, which is available either as a liquid for sprayers, in dry form, in fertilizers, as a weed stick, and even in aerosol cans. Apply uniformly and follow label directions carefully.

Step 5. Irrigate to keep the lawn green

To keep your turf green and growing, water it regularly. However, water can become expensive and scarce. So, some prefer to let their lawns go dormant in periods of drought. Do water enough, however, to insure fall recovery. Water is not a substitute for fertilizer.
Step 6. Prevent crabgrass

A number of proven crabgrass preventives are now available at local garden stores. To be effective, any of these products must be present near the soil surface in adequate amounts when crabgrass seedlings begin. Therefore, timely, sufficient and uniform application is the key to success to crabgrass control. You may treat the entire lawn, or only a portion. Without competition from pesky crabgrass, it is easier to keep bluegrass lawns dense and healthy.

Step 7. Prevent insect damage

Insect control in lawns is easy, and is not frequently needed. However, knowing what and how to do it is important to success. Treat for grubs in April, using insecticides such as Diazinon, Dursban or Dylox. One application should give control for 3-5 years. Occasionally, sod webworms will eat grass leaves in summer. Two sprays with Dylox, Sevin, Diazinon, Dursban or Spectracide will stop activity. The best time for their control however, is in mid-May to kill the larvae of the first brood.

Step 8. Make room for new leaves

In early spring, remove the brown tips of old growth to manicure your lawn and let the new growth show earlier. Close mowing, plus sweeping, then fertilizing, makes a spring lawn the brightest. In early fall, power rakes and thinners do a good job of thinning. They can reduce crabgrass and weeds, as well as removing much of the thatch and old clippings.

Step 9. Protect against diseases that kill leaves

Fungicide use is time-consuming and costly and demands considerable management. Be sure you have correctly diagnosed the disease and select the appropriate chemical for treatment. Then, apply the treatment before the damage becomes severe. Over-watering, over-fertilizing or mowing too short all help to encourage lawn diseases.

Step 10. Kill unwanted patches

To have that perfect, smooth look, kill unwanted patches of clover, bent, etc. However, be cautious in trying selective killing. You can overdo it, or it may disfigure and discolor areas for long periods. Resodding may be preferable. Check with your local sod supplier for information on this. If your unwanted patches are sufficiently bad, you may want to kill everything and just begin again.

The new green vegetation killer glyphosate offers complete lawn kill and permits reseeding after a 1-3 day waiting period.

Related publications

For additional information, see:
AY 5 Varieties and Mixtures for Lawns
AY 6 How Does Zoysia Look for Midwestern Lawns?

These publications are available at your County Extension Office, or Mailing Room, Agricultural Administration Building, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907.

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