

Tune up your lawn and garden.

The organic approach to spring lawn care minimizes labour, eliminates costly poisons, and doesn't strive for a putting green surface. An organic lawn may have a few weeds in the mix, but who cares? The turf will be vigorous enough to defend itself against any major invasion. Instead of a weekend of being a slave to your lawn, you'll have a good-looking chemical free lawn you can admire from your hammock. If you follow this advice you'll have more time to putter in the garden and enjoy summer. Isn't that what its all about?

- 1) **Sharpen up.** Spring is the time to sharpen your mower blade to ensure a neat, clean cut. Dull blades tear at grass giving it a frayed look and making it more prone to disease.
- 2) **Go easy on the crew cut.** The recommended height for a healthy lawn is 2.5 – 3". Never cut more than a third off your the leaves full height. Tall grass shades out weeds. When you cut it too short, you weaken it. The grass has less surface to take in light.
- 3) **Let it lie.** Grass clippings are a terrific, renewable source of nitrogen. By keeping them on the lawn you cut your fertilizing needs in half. Speaking of which...
- 4) **Don't overfeed.** Many people fertilize too much, too often. The best times to fertilize are in early or late spring and in early fall. Annually most lawns need 3 to 4 pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 sq. ft. By leaving grass clippings on the lawn you immediately leave 2 lbs of nitrogen. If you spread just a quarter inch of compost onto the lawn, you spread another pound. This should be enough for most lawns. If you require more, try planting low-growing white clover. Microbes that grow on the cover's roots pull nitrogen from the air and convert to a form that plants can use.
- 5) **Find the right mix.** If you don't have access to compost, apply organic fertilizers. Spread no more than 1 pound per 1,000 sq. ft. per application.
- 6) **Drop that hose.** Resist the urge to sprinkle each evening. Frequent watering promotes shallow roots. Instead, give the lawn one good soaking per week and take rainfall into consideration.
- 7) **Less is more.** Many homeowners falsely believe that grass clippings contribute to thatch. Actually thatch is an accumulation of dead, partially decomposed grass roots and stems caused by excessive fertilizing and watering. When you overfeed grass grows unnaturally fast. Its roots tend to cluster at the surface and eventually turn into a dense impermeable mat. Thatch prevents water from reaching the soil and holds moisture near the plants, encouraging disease and pest problems. Don't obsess about watering and fertilizing.
- 8) **Rip it up.** To determine if thatch is a problem in your yard, poke your finger into the grass. If it feels soft and springy and your finger doesn't reach the soil, get to work. The best time to de-thatch is in early spring just after the first growth. If the thatch layer isn't too thick, a good stiff rake will do. An easier approach is to let compost do the work for you. Spread a light layer (about 3/8 of an inch) over

- the lawn, and the compost releases millions of active microbes that break down the thatch. It also suppresses many diseases. Field studies have shown that compost can be as effective as chemical fungicides in suppressing blight and root-rot diseases.
- 9) **Let it breath.** If your soil is clay or packed down by heavy traffic you should aerate. Compacted soil slows down penetration of water and nutrients, stunts root growth, and limits gas exchanges between dirt and air. Aerating is nothing more than punching holes into your lawn. You can use a hand tool, such as a spade, or walk around in spikes that you clamp on your boots. (Golf shoes will also work.)
 - 10) **Attack those weeds if you really must.** Corn-gluten meal is an organic killer of weed seeds and seedlings. Spread this on your lawn in the spring, and it will suppress any newly sprouted weeds. Note, it will also kill new grass, so use it only on an established lawn. Corn gluten contains 10% nitrogen so be sure to factor this in if you decide to fertilize.
 - 11) **Yank them out.** If dandelion tea or greens are not on your menu, you'll need to get physical on these aggressive invaders. Dandelions send down taproot as deep as 1 foot. To kill an established dandelion you must remove at least 4-5 inches of the weed. Remember, by simply keeping your grass at least 2.5" you will shade many dandelions and other weeds so they won't sprout. Once you get a handle on them, taking a few out each week is a breeze.
 - 12) **Cover the bare spots.** If you remove dandelions or other weeds, immediately sow grass seed onto bare spots to discourage other weeds from moving in. Scrape the soil with a rake, broadcast seed, and cover it with sifted composted or topsoil. Keep it moist until the grass sprouts.

Now sit back and enjoy the summer!!

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QUICK FACTS ON LAWN AND GARDEN CHEMICALS

- An analysis of the most popular lawn and garden pesticides shows more than half of the products include ingredients classified by the EPA or the World Health Organization as possible carcinogens, one-third contain known or suspected endocrine disruptors, and more than a quarter contain reproductive toxins.
- Over 40% of the most commonly used lawn and garden pesticides are banned in other countries, yet U.S. homeowners annually apply 90 million pounds of these types of pesticides to gardens and lawns where children frequently play.
- Homeowners apply three times more pesticides per acre to their lawns than farmers apply to agricultural crops.

An EPA study found that lawn pesticides are easily tracked indoors and exist in the carpet and flooring for years.