



Your Green, Green Grass at Home

By Mallory Gwynn

There's nothing like a healthy green lawn to enjoy all summer long. From ball games to barbeques, to just lying out in the sun, that green carpet is truly an asset to any home. Did you know that healthy grass is also excellent for the environment? Birds feed on the rich source of insects, worms and other food. It helps control erosion and is efficient in converting carbon dioxide to oxygen.

If you take care of your lawn properly it not only enhances its appearance but it also contributes to environmental benefits. You may think you have to be an expert to grow a healthy lawn, but it's really quite simple. Anybody can do it! All you really have to do is work in harmony with natural processes. Grass thrives where the growing conditions are optimal for the plant itself. If done properly it will naturally resist damage from weeds, disease and insects.



The real secret to a healthy lawn is to work proactively rather than reactively, much like we do with our own bodies when we are on a preventative care program. The old saying still rings true; an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Weeds, most diseases, and even insect attacks will be diminished with a healthy lawn.

The first step is to develop healthy soil for the roots of your lawn to grow deep. Good texture, key nutrients and the proper pH are critical elements in establishing good soil. Observe the texture of your soil to determine its content of clay, silt and sand. Lawns grow best with a "loamy" soil, but whatever type of soil you have; it can always be improved by adding organic matter, like compost or even grass clippings. Organic matter serves to lighten heavy clay soils and it also helps a sandy soil retain water and nutrients.

If your soil is packed down from years of use or heavy clay content, the roots of grass will have a difficult time receiving the air and water necessary for sustained growth. In cases like this it is important to aerate once or twice a year. The process of aeration involves pulling plugs out of the soil to create air spaces, so that water and nutrients can penetrate to the roots of the grass. This type of equipment is not usually purchased by a homeowner, rather rented from a local company such as Sunbelt Reynolds.

One of the best things you can do for long term success for a lush lawn is to have your soil tested periodically for pH, nutrient level and tilth. This will give you a clear perspective on the

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condition of your soil. Most lawns need to be fertilized once a year, because they need more nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium than soil usually contains naturally. These three elements are the primary ingredients found in most lawn fertilizers, and as much as it is necessary, it's important not to overfeed. It's best to use a slow-release balanced fertilizer and keep your pH level at about 6.5 -7.0 on the pH scale. On the west side of the Cascades our rainfall usually drives the pH to lower levels that are unfavorable to grass. It can be sweetened by adding lime. Check with your local independent garden center for the proper application for your soil conditions.

Choosing the right type of grass seed for your particular application is important as is choosing a seed that works well in the climate you live in. Some grasses thrive in a humid climate, while others do well in a more arid environment. Whatever your climate is, be sure to match the type of seed to the conditions that it will grow in. Exposure to the sun is another important factor to consider. If you have shade, then use a seed that tolerates shade and, conversely, use a sun mix in full sun. Remember, no grass seed does well in complete shade. I recommend Major League brand lawn seed for our area.

When it comes to mowing your lawn, a few tips can really make a difference in your lawn's overall health. Mow high and often. By keeping your lawn a bit longer, you will produce stronger, healthier grass with fewer pest problems. Longer grass has more leaf surface to take in sunlight. This enables it to grow thicker and develop a deeper root system. This results in grass that survives drought conditions better, tolerates insect damage and diminishes disease. Another benefit to longer grass is that it shades the soil surface, keeping it cooler, and that helps retain moisture and weeds have difficulty in their germination process. The ideal length of lawn will vary according to the type and variety you choose, but most grasses on the west side of the mountains will do well cut at 2-1/2 to 3-1/2 inches.

Mow with a sharp blade and mow often. A sharp blade will prevent tearing and injury to the grass. It's also best to mow often, because lawn adjusts much better to more frequent mowing. Mow often enough that you never cut more than one-third of the height of the grass blades. This also allows you the option to leave the clippings on the lawn to recycle nitrogen back into the soil. An inch of clippings over the course of the summer will do more than you would imagine.

Most grass will form a layer of dead plant material between the blades of grass and the soil called thatch. When thatch gets thicker than 1/2 inch, it begins to prevent water and nutrients from getting to the soil and roots. Raking or using a detaching attachment can help break this layer up. Using a thin layer of compost over the lawn will also help its decomposition.

Watering deep and often is also essential to a healthy lawn. Most lawns are still watered too shallow and more frequent than necessary. By watering deep, you train the roots to grow deep and, therefore, the lawn is less vulnerable in the harshest hot days of summer. Water your lawn in a way that imitates a slow, soaking rain and if you water in the early hours of the day, there will be less evaporation, which conserves our precious natural resource, water. One inch of water per week should be adequate for most lawns in the Northwest.

A few simple steps can insure a wonderful season of fun in the sun on your lush green lawn.

About the Author

Growing up on his parents' farm, Mallory has been an avid gardener since childhood and his passion for plants and the soil is truly inspiring. For the past four years Mallory has worked at Al's Garden Center in Woodburn, Oregon where he's addressed hundreds of gardening questions daily and now serves as Al's Human Resources Director.

In 2002, Mallory first appeared on Good Day Lifestyles as "The Garden Guy" Saturday mornings on Fox 12 and is thrilled to be the host of "Simply Gardening" on News/Talk 860 KPAM aired on Sunday mornings.

Mallory is the current President of the Oregon Association of Nurseries Retail Chapter and recently completed the OSU Master Gardeners course.