

Best Practices for Your Lawn

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Most lawns locally are tall fescue which is the best adapted cool season grass for our region. Tall fescues are a cool season grass that can be fertilized in early spring or in the fall. Summer fertilization is not recommended for the home lawn and will cause more damage than good.

Proper Grass Height

I often see lawns being cut too short. For fescue lawns we can set the mower to three inches and leave it there all season. The minimum height for a fescue lawn is two inches in cooler periods and two and a half inches during warmer periods. Mowing height is critical to encourage drought resistance and reduce weed competition. A taller leaf blade shades the soil keeping it cooler thereby reducing water loss and reducing the germination of weed seeds. Higher top growth also encourages a larger, deeper reaching root system. This larger root systems will enable the plant to find more nutrients and water improving survival and regrowth when stressed.

Mowing Frequency

Mowing frequency should not be driven by a schedule, but instead, by growth with a goal to never remove more than one third of the leaf blade. If the mowing height is three inches we should mow when the grass reaches four and a half inches tall or shorter. Allowing lawns to over grow and then removing more than one third of the total height is stressful to the grass. If a needed mowing is missed or delayed, it's best to only remove one third of the blade and gradually reduce the height back to the preferred height over a couple of mowings rather than a single drastic event.

Mowing Direction

Mow in a different direction from one time to the next. This will reduce soil compaction caused by the mowers wheels and will also help the grass grow straight up. For example, one week go across the lawn from east to west. Then the next time go north to south. Try a diagonal pattern and cross the opposite way for the next mowing.

Irrigating Wisely

If you have an irrigation system use it to promote drought resistance. Frequent shallower irrigations create a shallow rooted lawn. Implement deep and infrequent irrigation to encourage roots to growth deeply. I suggest digging in the soil to see if you're reaching 5-6" depth with your irrigation. Make sure you adjust the quantity of water based on plant needs based on weather; July and August would likely see higher water use than mid-May. Also consider that when we have rain you should reduce irrigation accordingly. Too much water will encourage foliar diseases and can literally drown roots especially in clay rich soils.

Fertilizing

Looking ahead, if you'd like to limit mowing frequency, I would recommend fall fertilization alone to encourage grass health and not significantly increase mowing frequency. Absent a soil test, the suggested fertilization is nitrogen only. A good fall fertilization schedule is applying 11lb of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet of lawns in mid-September then a second application in

mid-October. If September is hot and dry, delay that first application until October and make the second application in November.

“Lawn and Landscape Weed Control for Homeowners,”

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W1068.pdf>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

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