

Article Submitted by:
Mark J. Talbert
Clemson Extension Agent

4 Steps to Natural Lawn Care

Healthy lawns grow on healthy soil. Employing proper soil preparation and lawn maintenance practices will help build healthy soil and vigorous, deep-rooted lawns.

Healthy lawns tend to be resistant to disease, tolerate some insect and drought damage, and will out-compete some weeds. The practices recommended here can help make lawns healthier, protect beneficial soil organisms, and protect our environment.

Step 1. Grasscycle: Mow high, mow often and leave the clippings.

Set mowing height to remove only one-third of the grass length at each mowing. Try to mow weekly in spring. Cutting too much at once stresses the grass. Mowing height varies by type of grass, but mowing high helps develop deeper roots and crowds out weeds. Leave the clippings on the lawn. “Grasscycling” provides free fertilizer (at least ¼ of your lawn’s needs), helps lawns grow greener and denser, and doesn’t cause thatch buildup.

You can grasscycle with your existing mower. For best results, keep the blade sharp, mow when the grass is dry, and mow a little more often in the spring. Clippings left scattered on the surface will break down quickly. If there are clumps, mow again to break them up. Push mowers work great for grasscycling. Mulch mowers leave a neat appearance.

Step 2. Fertilize moderately in late spring and before the end of August with a “natural organic” or “slow-release” fertilizer. Before applying any fertilizer to your lawn, have your soil tested.

Slow-release fertilizers feed nutrients to the lawn slowly, and less is wasted through leaching or runoff to streams. “Quick-release” fertilizers are 100 percent water soluble and wash into streams easily. Instead, look for the words “natural organic” or “slow-release” on the bag.

Healthy lawns are a medium green color, depending on the variety of grass. The darkest green turf, which many people strive for, is not in fact the healthiest turf. Over-fertilized lawns are more prone to disease, thatch buildup and drought damage.

With slow-release or organics fertilizers, you can fertilize just twice a year, in mid-to late May and again in late August. If you choose to fertilize only once, the fall application is the most important.

Remember, grasscycling returns valuable nutrients to the soil every time you mow!

Fertilizer: How much is enough?

Clemson Extension recommends that home lawns receive one to four pounds (depending on the type of grass) of nitrogen (in a balanced fertilizer) per 1,000 square feet of lawn each year. Grasscycling can supply at least one-quarter of that. Split the rest into two or three applications before the end of August. Avoid fertilizing in the early spring because it makes lawns grow too fast (unless your lawn needs help recovering from disease or insect damage) wait until June.

Step 3. Water deeply to moisten the root zone, but infrequently. Grasses do better when the whole root zone is wet and then partially dries out between waterings. Avoid frequent shallow watering; that causes shallow rooting. Overwatering can promote lawn disease, leach nutrients from the soil and waste water.

Aerate the lawn if water won't penetrate because of soil compaction or thatch buildup. Dethatching also will help if there is heavy thatch buildup.

Step 4. Think twice before using "weed and feed" or other pesticides. These products may damage soil and lawn health and pollute our waterways. Some studies also suggest that using pesticides may harm our health.

Accept a few "weeds" in your lawn. Some, like clover, may look fine. Target the problem weeds, leave the others. Remove problem weeds by hand in the spring and fall. Don't cover your entire lawn with weed and feed just to kill a few dandelions. Pincer-type long handled weed pullers are available at many garden stores. They work well in moist soil, with no stooping. Pull dandelions when they're young (for best results, get as much of the root as possible). Spot-spray problem weeds with the proper herbicide at the right time of year. Identify the weed to make sure you are using the correct product. Read the label carefully before using any pesticide. Be sure to follow all label warnings, wear proper protective clothing and keep children and pets off the lawn for at least as long as the label specifies. Only buy as much as you need and completely use the contents before disposing of the container.

Have a happy garden!

The Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service offers its programs to people of all ages regardless of race, color, gender, religion, national origin, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital or family status and is an equal opportunity employer. Clemson University cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture and South Carolina Counties. Issued in Furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Acts of May and June 30, 1914.