

May 2021 Gardener's Corner

By Cate White, San Joaquin County Master Gardener

Maintaining a vibrant and healthy lawn can be made easier by following a few recommended practices that will get the best results for the time spent. Lawn care falls into several categories, including watering, mowing, fertilizing, aerating and dethatching.

Watering correctly will keep various problems from arising and will be especially important this year as we are entering severe drought conditions. Measure the depth of moisture in your lawn by using a screwdriver or similar tool. The lawn will need watering when the top two inches of soil are dry. It is best to water deeply and less often to prevent overgrowth and thatch buildup, not more than two or three times per week. It's preferable to water in the early morning hours rather than in the evening, which can make your lawn prone to certain diseases. Watch for water run-off, which is not only wasteful, but can pollute rivers and streams with fertilizers and pesticides. If you see run-off, try running your sprinklers for a shorter time, then repeat the cycle once the water has sunk in. To be sure you have full sprinkler coverage, try the "tuna can test". Place a number of shallow cans around your lawn and run the sprinklers. Then measure to see that each can has about the same amount of water. If not, re-adjust the sprinkler heads and check to be sure each one is functioning correctly.



Watering Lawn
Open Source Photo

When mowing your lawn, cut it down by no more than one third each time. Be sure your mower blades are sharp, and that the grass is dry. It's best to reverse the direction you mow each time to keep the grass blades from leaning one way. This helps avoid a visible mowing pattern. To keep nutrients in the grass clippings from being wasted, practice "grasscycling", allowing the clippings to remain on your lawn. They will drift down through the turf and decompose, returning their nutrients to the soil. Up to 20% of your lawn's nitrogen requirements can be met in this way. This practice not only reduces the amount chemical fertilizer you will need to use, but it also reduces the amount of green waste that often ends up in our landfills.



Well - Mowed, Healthy Grass
Open Source Photo

When it comes to fertilizing, it is helpful to know what species of turfgrass you have. To identify your type of grass, go to www.ipm.ucanr.edu, and click Home, Garden and Landscape Pests. From there click on Lawns and Turf, and follow the prompts to turfgrass identification. This will help you to know the amount of fertilizer you need and when to apply it. In general, lawn fertilizer contains three main nutrients: phosphorus, potassium and nitrogen. However, nitrogen is the primary ingredient your lawn regularly needs. To prepare for fertilizing, water your lawn thoroughly in advance, but make sure it's completely dry before applying the fertilizer. As a rule, no more than one pound of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet of lawn should be applied at a time. After fertilizing, water just enough to wash the fertilizer off the grass blades and allow it to sink into the soil. Over-fertilizing can cause thatch build-up and chemical run-off problems. Adjust your spreader accordingly. May is a good month to fertilize most species of turfgrass.

Thatch build-up and lack of aeration are two common problems that occur in lawns over time. Thatch is a layer of living and decaying tissue between the grass blades and the soil. A thin layer of thatch can be helpful, as it holds in moisture and keeps down weeds. However, if a thick layer of thatch builds up, it can prevent air, water and nutrients from reaching the grass roots, and also lead to fungal growth. To prevent heavy thatch build-up, avoid frequent, shallow watering, over fertilizing, and mow correctly. Soil compaction can lead to lack of aeration, which also deprives roots of air, water and nutrients, causing multiple problems such as insect damage, disease, and susceptibility to drought. Soil aeration involves removing small plugs from the lawn. For small lawns, there are hand tools for both dethatching and aerating. For larger lawns, power tools are available, although you may want to have the job done by a professional.

Information for this article was taken from the UCANR IPM web site, under "Lawn Care for Established Lawns".

May Garden Checklist

- Control ants with baits or traps. Eliminate standing water under flowerpots, and in drain pipes or gutters to control mosquitos.
- Keep monitoring citrus for Asian Citrus Psyllid
- Look for oozing or dead limbs on apple, crabapple, pear and pyracantha, a sign of Fire Blight.
- Continue monitoring and adjusting irrigation according to the weather.
- Apply mulch to bare areas.

- Check for signs of powdery mildew on apple, crepe myrtle and roses. Control with neem oil.
- Control aphids with insecticidal soap or neem oil.
- Put out and maintain Yellowjacket traps.
- Plant or sow seeds of cucumber, beans, squash, and melons. Start seed potatoes. It's still time to plant tomatoes, peppers and eggplant. Also plant flowering summer annuals such as zinnias, petunias, portulaca and vinca.
- Aerate lawns that get heavy foot traffic.
- Fertilize cane berries, citrus, deciduous fruit trees, palms, and heavily flowering shrubs with slow release fertilizer if not done in March or April.
- If you have fruit trees, now is the time to thin the fruit. Be ruthless. Proper thinning will lead to bigger and tastier fruit.