

July 2007

Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens

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“Put Your Lawn on a Healthy Diet”

If you're spending a lot of time and money on your lawn to get that perfect “golf course look,” then you have probably set your expectations way too high. Most people don't realize that to keep that perfect manicured look actually requires more labor, time, and money, which in today's world is not practical for the average homeowner. Unfortunately, people get caught into a vicious cycle of adding more fertilizer, water, and cutting the grass shorter and shorter with fancy, expensive mowers. Ironically, the more you feed and baby your lawn, the more dependent it becomes on your care. In addition, over maintenance can result in undue stress, which makes lawns more susceptible to diseases and insects. As a result, the lawn then requires even more maintenance and pesticides to deal with these stress-related disorders. There are a few easy steps to breaking this vicious cycle while maintaining a healthy lawn, and it all begins with putting your lawn on a diet!

First, the more you fertilize, the more you will have to water your grass, and therefore the more you will have to mow your grass. If you enjoy mowing your grass every other day, then go right ahead! Otherwise, put your lawn on a fertilizer diet by applying the recommended rate of fertilizer for your type of lawn. We have several Cooperative Extension publications available online about different lawns and their fertilizer needs. Fertilize lightly in the summer months, especially on cool-season grasses like fescue. Too much nitrogen can actually increase stress on lawns during a drought and make it more susceptible to turfgrass diseases. Also, be sure to have your soil tested every couple of years to make sure your soil pH is on target. If your soil pH is not balanced with the right amount of lime, then you're wasting your money on fertilizer since your lawn will not be able to take up the necessary nutrients.

Second, put your lawn on controlled portions of water. Most established lawns need only 1” inch of water per week. Only one or two applications totaling 1” inch of water is all that is needed every 7 to 10 days if no rain is in the forecast. The number one cause of many turfgrass diseases is watering too often. By watering less often and more deeply, you can actually encourage deeper root growth, which will ultimately make the grass more drought tolerant. Be sure to test your sprinkler output by timing how long it takes to put out 1” inch of water. Randomly place several shallow tuna or cat food cans around your lawn as a rain gauge since these are about 1” inch deep. After you determine how long it takes to fill the cans, you can then program your sprinkler system based on this set amount of time. Each sprinkler system is different and over time sprinkler nozzle heads can wear out, so be sure to check your system at least once a year to make sure that your sprinklers are applying water evenly.

The third part of your lawn diet should be to reduce soil compaction. Changing the amount of fiber to your lawn's diet won't help this situation. However, using a core aerator machine can relieve soil compaction and increase air, water, and nutrient movement into the soil. It's best to rent a power aerator that has hollow tines or spoons, so it removes a soil core 2 to 3” inches deep and 1/2 to 3/4” of an inch in diameter. Core aeration should be done during periods of active growth and when the soil is moist enough to allow deep penetration. Ideally, this should be done in early summer for

warm-season grasses like Bermuda, Centipede and Zoysia. Fescue lawns should be aerated in spring or fall.

Lastly, for your lawn's diet to be effective, you should always include plenty of exercise when you mow the grass (and burn a few of your own calories in the process). Ideally, you should mow your lawn frequently enough that you are not taking off more than one third of the leaf blade during a single mowing and make sure your clippings are no longer than 1" inch. If you wait too long between mowing, your grass will get too tall and you will end up having long, excess clippings accumulate on the lawn. These clippings can build up and cause thatch and disease problems. However, if the amounts of clippings are reduced through more frequent mowing, then they will naturally decompose and return nutrients back into the soil. These clippings can actually recycle enough nutrients to cut back one application of fertilizer per year and save you the time of having to go back out and rake up excess clippings. Also, be sure to raise your mowing height to 2" or 3" inches in summer to reduce stress on your turfgrass and make it more drought tolerant.

For more information, please view our free online publication "Lawns in Georgia" and other related publications at <<http://www.caes.uga.edu/publications/>>.

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