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Cooperative Extension
Rockland County

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Spring Lawn Care

Gardeners may start working on their lawns as soon as weather permits. The soil should be dry enough to crumble in your hand, not soggy or muddy. While spring seeding is necessary to cover bare patches, the best time to fully renovate a lawn is early fall (September) as the new seedlings will not be stressed by summer heat, and weeds emerge at a lower rate in fall than in spring.

Raking and Aerating

A thorough raking to clean off leaves, twigs and debris is the first step in reviving the lawn in spring. Rake the lawn gently if the grass is not strongly rooted. If the lawn has more than $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thatch, it should be aerated in early September. However, if this must be done in spring, aerate in early April.

Liming

Grass will not grow well in soil that is too acidic. Cooperative Extension will test the soil pH (acidity) for a small fee. If the soil is moderately acid with a pH of 6 or above, it does not need lime. A pH below 6 indicates a need for limestone. Do not add more lime than necessary; a high pH (above 7.4) will also cause problems, and it is much easier to raise the pH than to lower it.

Optimally, the soil pH (acidity level) should be maintained at a range of 6.0-7.0. Plant nutrients are available and beneficial microorganisms are most effective within this range. Modify the pH according to soil test recommendations.

Fertilizing

Soil fertility influences the lawn's ability to resist pests. Soil testing is the first step in determining fertilizer requirements of a lawn. Old, established lawns may not require fertilization. Soil testing information may be obtained from Cornell Cooperative Extension.

Nitrogen (N) is needed in moderate amounts for a pest resistant lawn. Leaving grass clippings on the lawn may reduce these requirements by 30 percent. Phosphorous (P) and potassium (K) are present in adequate levels in most soils in Rockland County and New York State. Additional phosphorus is likely to be carried by water runoff into bodies of water. In late fall, the risk of runoff and water pollution increases. New York State Law prohibits the application of lawn fertilizer containing phosphorous unless indicated by a soil test or the application of any lawn fertilizer between December 1 and April 1. Fertilizer must be removed if it is spilled or lands on an impervious surface, and cannot be applied within 20 feet of surface water, with few exceptions.

Building Strong and Vibrant New York Communities

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Lawns should be fertilized in the fall, if indicated by a soil test, as most root growth and food storage occurs at this time. An application may be made once the weather has cooled enough to minimize fertilizer burn – around Labor Day, though you may apply fertilizer effectively through early October. High maintenance lawns may be fertilized in fall and in late spring (around Memorial Day). Slow release fertilizer sources such as natural organics will provide more uniform release of nitrogen. The lawn will be green for an extended period of time, and top growth won't be excessive. Some natural organic compost-based products will also suppress diseases.

Reseeding

If the grass is thin, you may overseed to increase density. Grass seed thrown on a thick, established lawn is wasted. If the lawn is thin, better maintenance practices should improve it over time. Bare spots should be raked out and the soil loosened. Sprinkle seed on the soil, scratch the seed into the top one-quarter inch of soil, and keep it moist two or three weeks until the seedlings are well established. Gradually reduce watering when the seedlings become large enough to mow. Make sure newly seeded areas get at least one inch of water, from rain or irrigation weekly for their first season, as they will not develop full drought tolerance until they are at least a year old. Expect more weeds to germinate in spring-seeded turf than fall-seeded turf.

Weed Management

A healthy, dense turf will not have many weed problems. Mow your grass high (at least three inches) to encourage deeper rooting. Taller leaf blades will also shade the soil and help prevent weed seed germination.

Broadleaf Weeds

Hand-pull small patches of weeds before they become established. Contact our diagnostic lab at 845-429-7085 for weed identification and for guidelines to the most effective treatment for specific weeds. Use herbicides only if an unacceptable number of weeds are present; follow label directions carefully. Some products are meant for use on mature turf only; be sure to check the label if you have recently seeded new grass. The best time to manage broadleaf weeds with herbicides is in early September to October. Continue with management practices that encourage dense grass.

Crabgrass

Crabgrass will sprout in thin or bare spots in late April. Take steps to increase turf density. As a last resort, apply a crabgrass (pre-emergent) preventer in April when the yellow forsythia bushes are in full bloom. If you have seeded a new lawn, use siduron (Tupersan), the only material currently on the market that will not damage young lawn grasses, when used at a reduced rate. On mature lawns, you may use Balan, Halts, Pre-M, Tupersan, and others. Follow label directions carefully – some of these products may discolor the lawn.

Dealing with Grubs

Mature grubs may be present in your lawn in the spring, but there is no effective means of chemical management available for these older larvae. Since grubs do most of their feeding damage when they are small, in the late summer and early fall, the time to treat them is mid-August through September (if there are more than eight to ten in a square foot area). Lawns that may be rolled back like a carpet (due to root damage) or lawns where animals such as skunks make holes while searching for food may indicate a grub problem.

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The information on pest management for New York State contained in this publication is dated July 2011. The user is responsible for obtaining the most up-to-date pest management information. Contact any Cornell Cooperative Extension county office or PMEP (<http://pmez.cce.cornell.edu/>), the Cornell Cooperative Extension pesticide information website. The information herein is no substitute for pesticide labeling. The user is solely responsible for reading and following manufacturer's labeling and instructions