

Natural Lawn Care for Homeowners

CALENDAR

MARCH	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sharpen mower blades• Clean up winter debris – leaves, twigs, pine cones
APRIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mowing – remove only 1/3 of the leaf blade or less at a time<ul style="list-style-type: none">First mowing – grass height of 2 inchesRegular mowing – grass height of 2½ to 3½ inches (or taller)• Apply corn gluten before the forsythia bloom (early weeks of April) to prevent weed seeds from germinating• Hand pull or spot spray weeds with an organic herbicide• Fill in bare spots with a 50/50 mix of compost and soil, and seed with grass• Apply compost tea to entire lawn
MAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Test soil for pH and nutrients (see our “Soil Testing for Homeowners” Factsheet)• First fertilization - top dress with a compost/soil mix OR fertilize with a natural organic fertilizer (see our “Products for Your Natural Lawn” factsheet)• Aerate - core aeration removes soil/grass plugs, reduces compaction• Overseed entire lawn when soil temperature reaches 50 degrees using hardy grass types or mixtures• Grub control - apply beneficial nematodes or milky spore (Japanese beetle grubs only)
JUNE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Begin irrigation as needed<ul style="list-style-type: none">Apply 1 to 1½ inches of water, once a week in the a.m.• Recycle grass clippings on your lawn or in a compost bin• Hand pull or spot spray weeds• Apply compost tea to entire lawn• Insect problems – tolerate some; use natural controls, organic insecticide or appropriate least-toxic pesticide
JULY	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fertilize (1st through the 15th)• Look for signs of weed, disease or pest problems – address underlying soil or turf health issues
AUGUST	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Look for signs of weed, disease or pest problems – address underlying soil or turf health issues• Continue irrigation or allow lawn to go dormant• Overseed entire lawn (after the 15th)
SEPTEMBER	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limit irrigation• Aerate as needed (grass should be actively growing)• Fertilize (1st through the 15th)
OCTOBER	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Late season fertilization – generally 1 week before final mowing of the year
NOVEMBER	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mow until lawn goes dormant<ul style="list-style-type: none">Last mowing – grass height of 2 inches• Apply compost tea to entire lawn
DECEMBER	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduce lawn traffic - let it rest through February



Why should I...

TEST MY SOIL FOR PH & NUTRIENTS?

Grass thrives when nutrients and pH are properly balanced. A soil test helps determine exactly what the lawn needs, which reduces unnecessary fertilizer applications and saves money.

SHARPEN MOWER BLADES?

Dull blades can tear grass unevenly, making it vulnerable to disease.

REMOVE ONE THIRD OF THE LEAF BLADE OR LESS?

Taking off more than one third of the grass blade at a time can shock and kill grass

MOW GRASS TO A HEIGHT OF 2.5-3.5 INCHES?

Longer grass shades soil and prevents sunlight from getting through to weeds; short is stunted and inhibits root growth, an essential part of healthy lawns.

SPOT SPRAY WITH ORGANIC HERBICIDES?

Weeds rarely take over an entire lawn. Spot spraying targets the weed and reduces pesticides. Always read and follow the directions on any pesticide product carefully.

USE NATURAL ORGANIC FERTILIZERS?

Natural organic fertilizers contain decayed living plant materials, manure or blood/bone meal – not fossil fuels. They help restore organic matter to depleted soils, improve soil structure, retain moisture and provide a steady supply of nutrients versus quick release synthetic fertilizers. They break down slowly with the help of soil organisms, allowing grass to use nutrients when needed. Fertilizers should only be added after a soil test is taken, and then in response to an identified nutrient need.

APPLY CORN GLUTEN?

Corn gluten is a safe natural pre-emergent weed control that is applied over 2 or 3 growing seasons for maximum impact.

OVERSEED?

Overseeding improves turf density, crowds out weeds and gives a fresh infusion of youth to older lawns. Use turf-type tall fescues, fine fescues or perennial rye grass or a mixture, depending on need and site conditions, to create a diverse and resilient lawn. If corn gluten was applied, wait at least 60 days before seeding.

APPLY COMPOST TEA?

Teas help prevent diseases, convert nutrients in the soil and improve turf health.

TOLERATE INSECTS OR USE NATURAL/ORGANIC CONTROLS?

Many insects are beneficial for lawns and gardens, yet most pesticides are indiscriminate – killing both good and bad bugs. Insects can often be controlled with natural controls and healthy lawn practices, such as deep infrequent watering or using grass seed infused with endophytes – a symbiotic fungi that produces a compound that makes grass less appetizing to insects. Organic insecticides contain naturally occurring materials – such as mint oil, neem oil and citric acid. Least-toxic pesticides include insecticidal soaps (potassium salts of fatty acids) and boric acid among others. Always read and follow the directions on any pesticide product carefully.

AERATE?

Aerating will help alleviate compaction, providing more pore space in the soil for oxygen to break down organic matter, roots to grow and water storage.

LEAVE LAWN CLIPPINGS IN PLACE AFTER MOWING?

Clippings act as a natural fertilizer, returning roughly 30 to 40% of a lawn's total nutrient needs back into the soil.

BEGIN IRRIGATING AS NEEDED; APPLY 1-1.5 INCHES OF WATER/WEEK?

Water 1-1.5 inches per week, and less if it rains (you can leave an empty tuna can in the lawn and stop watering once its full). Make sure to water in the morning, so the lawn has time to dry out before night, to avoid fungal problems.

ADDRESS UNDERLYING SOIL/TURF HEALTH ISSUES?

Weeds, disease and pests often indicate an imbalance in the soil or unhealthy turf. Typically soil compaction, over-watering and improper fertilization cause an unhealthy lawn that is much more vulnerable to problems. Mowing the lawn too low will also result in stressed turf that cannot withstand disease and pest attacks. Addressing soil conditions and maintenance practices can eliminate many of these problems. See the "Read Your Weeds-A Simple Guide to Creating a Healthy Lawn" fact sheet on our website for examples of specific problems and their solutions.



Safer Pest Control Project is dedicated to reducing the health risks and environmental impacts of pesticides and promoting safer alternatives in Illinois.

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