

"Let There Be Lawns- Good Enough Lawns"

When I drive up and down my street, I am impressed by the expanse of green lawn. However, when I mention to a neighbor how attractive his grass appears, I am met with a litany of problems. There are weeds, bare spots, problems!

Cruising by in a car these lawns look good; they are mowed, neat, green. Ideally, for a busy family, the way to a perfect lawn is for someone else to do it, i.e. a professional lawn service to be responsible for it. For a good enough lawn surface for family Frisbee fun, be satisfied if it is neatly green.

When we speak of lawns we are really judging the condition of the soil in which they grow. Good soil is the beginning of good plant growth. Soil is never merely dirt: it is a complex thing of inorganic particles (silt, sand, clay) plus essential organic matter. This organic matter consists of nutrients and microorganisms including the myriad bacteria that break down organic matter into useable nutrients.

To grow a fine lawn requires that the soil be tested every three years to find out the pH and the relative levels of phosphorus and potassium. In figuring the pH, the central or neutral figure is 7. What tests 6.9 or below is acid: 7.1 and above is alkaline.

The soil's pH is important because your grass plant can't avail itself of the nutrition that is in the soil if the pH is wrong. Grass grows best at any point between 6.2 and 6.5. In coastal Virginia our soil is usually more acid than that and nearly a quarter of the soil tested runs 5.5 or lower, a degree of acidity which compromises grass growth.

Lime is used to raise the pH level but it must be used carefully. It is very insoluble and tends to stay where it is put so you have to spread it evenly without overlapping the application. When too much is used there is danger of raising the pH level to the point where the essential trace elements are not available to the plant roots. In using the white powdered limestone it is easier to see the missed spots. You have to be extra careful using the pelletized lime since it is more earth colored.

For established turf the recommendation is for 50 pounds for each 1000 square feet of lawn surface to be applied in the fall so it can break down over the winter. An amount that brings the pH level to 6.5 should last four to six years, despite the tendency of the soil to revert to its more acid level. One practice that increases the acidity is the use of nitrogen fertilizers such as ammonium nitrate and urea that break down to produce nitric acid.

If you have an established lawn and want to enhance its appearance, don't just add seed. Tech refers to this practice as expensive bird food. Seeding requires some soil preparation. For the do-it-yourself person a core aerator or a power rake/dethatcher can be rented. The core aerator is a machine that pulls out a plug of lawn surface which

it scatters allowing it to eventually decompose. Those machines with the metal spikes just compress the surrounding soil even further, adding to your problems.

Before using a dethatcher make sure thatch is really present. Generally, if you have kept your lawn mower set to three inches and let the clippings decay where they have fallen, thatch won't be a problem. Scratch with a rake to loosen the soil, add seed, cover with straw. For small areas don't waste money buying a huge bag of seed. Ten to fifteen seeds per square inch should produce a suitable patch of grass.

By covering it with a mulch you protect it. Don't use so much that you can't see the ground or so little that you invite the birds for lunch. There is a bonus in using wheat straw: you can mow it right along with the new grass and add organic matter to your lawn. In renovating a lawn, you are very fortunate if you have a compost pile. Sieved compost is a special gift for grass and it can be applied whenever you have time or inclination.

Do not let your patched spots dry out but don't drown them either. One reason you have put straw over the seed is to keep it from washing away in heavy rain. "Light & frequent" watering is a good rule of thumb. If you have lush grass in another area, cutting a slice of sod for the bald spots is an excellent quick fix. You do need to stomp it down to make sure the roots connect with your smoothly prepared area.

Gleaning all this information from Virginia Cooperative Extension reminds me why I have given up on having a lawn, happy to enjoy those of my neighbors.