

# Natural Lawn Care

## *for western Washington*

Easy practices for healthy lawns, healthy families,  
and a healthy environment!



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Seattle Public Utilities &  
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# Why go natural?

## Overuse of lawn pesticides and fertilizers contaminates our waterways

- These chemicals harm fish and wildlife
- Not healthy for children or pets either
- We often waste water on lawns in summer, when supplies are scarce



## The good news:

It's easy to have a healthy, beautiful lawn in the Pacific Northwest,

- without pesticides (weed and bug killers),
- without fertilizer runoff
- without wasting water

**You can save money, time, and our environment,** and grow a healthy lawn that looks great year 'round



## How? It's easy...

**Follow these 6 Steps** for a healthy, easy-care lawn:

1. Mow higher, mow regularly, and leave the clippings (“grasscycle”)
2. If needed, fertilize moderately in September or May with a “natural organic” or “slow-release” fertilizer
3. Water deeply, but less frequently. Or let lawns go dormant in summer
4. Improve poor lawns with aeration, overseeding, and compost topdressing
5. Avoid using “weed & feed” and other pesticides – use less-toxic alternatives
6. Consider alternatives to lawns in shady areas, on slopes, and near waterways



## Healthy lawns grow on healthy soil

**These practices build healthy soil**, with space for water and roots, earthworms, and organic matter to hold water and nutrients

- Healthy soil helps grow deeper roots, resist diseases and drought, grow denser turf
- Healthy soil also reduces fertilizer runoff, filters pollution, and conserves water



## Test your soil every 3-4 years

Dig in and take a look. Good soil is soil loose, brown, and crumbly at least 8 inches down. Problem soils may be hard and light colored, or gray and wet.

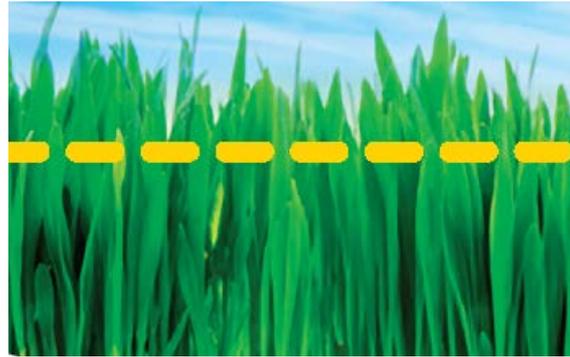
- Send a sample for a soil test, for recommendations on fertilizer or lime
- Soil tests are free in King County! Call the Garden Hotline to learn where, and help you interpret the results.

Improve poor soils by adding compost



# 1 Mow higher, mow regularly, and leave the clippings (“grasscycle”)

- Set mowing heights between 2 and 3 inches for most lawns
- Remove only one-third of grass length at each mowing
- “Grasscycle” – leave the clippings on the lawn. They provide free fertilizer



## Mulching lawn mowers

- You can grasscycle with your existing mower
- Electric and gas “mulching” mowers chop clippings and blow them down to soil to decompose
- Buying a new mower? Get a “mulching” mower
- Keep mower blades sharp!



## 2 If needed, use “natural organic” or “slow-release” fertilizer in September or May

- **Fertilize moderately.** Accept a lighter green color, for a healthier lawn
- **Do I need fertilizer? How much?** Apply ½ to 1 lb. of nitrogen per 1000 sq. ft. in the fall or spring
- Many home lawns on good soil do fine without regular fertilizing – with the free nutrients provided by grasscycling
- **Organic fertilizers release nutrients slowly to feed the lawn,** Look for “natural organic” or “slow-release” on the label
- **Choose no-phosphorus fertilizers to protect our waterways**
- **Fertilize in the fall,** September-October is best. In spring wait until growth slows in May
- **Soils west of the Cascades may be acidic** and low in calcium. Take soil test every 3 years to see if you need lime.



### 3 Water deeply, but less frequently.

Grass does better when the whole root zone is wetted, and then dries.

Save on water bills, by making every drop count:

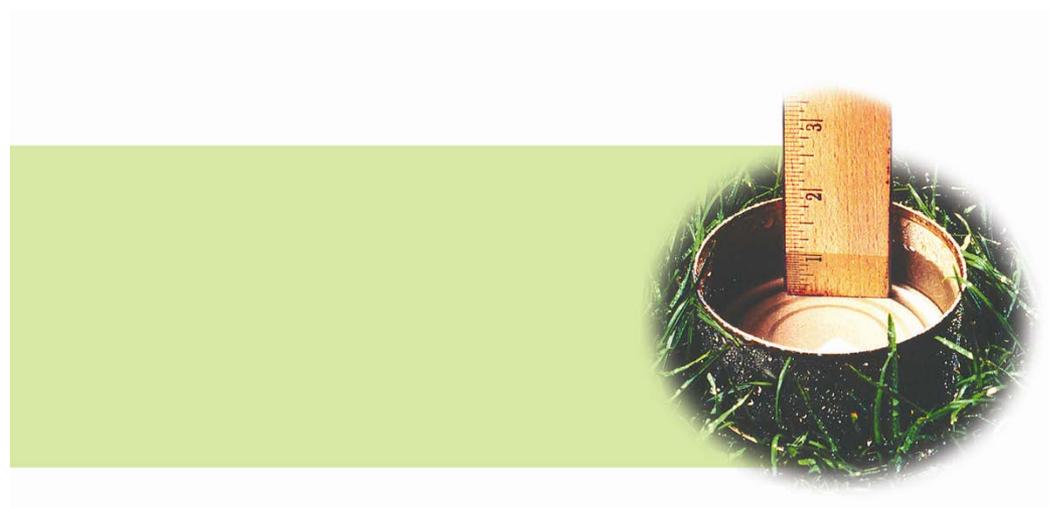
- Water early in the morning or late in the day, to reduce evaporation
- Aeration helps water penetrate.
- New lawns need water daily. Better to plant new lawns in September.
- Automatic irrigation systems can waste water. Learn how to improve efficiency at [www.SavingWater.org](http://www.SavingWater.org) or call the Garden Hotline.



## How much water is enough?

Lawns need about 1 inch of water per week in summer to stay green

- Scatter tin cans on the lawn
- Start the sprinkler. See how long it takes to get one inch of water in the cans. That's how long to water each week in the summer



Consider letting your lawn go brown and dormant in summer. It will green up when fall rains start



## 4 Improve poor lawns with aeration, overseeding, and compost topdressing

Use these practices on areas that are thin, weedy, or compacted

- Aerate compacted soil in spring or fall to improve root development
- Overseed with rye/fescue mix designed for Northwest conditions
- Topdress with  $\frac{1}{4}$  -  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch of compost, raking it into the grass

September or April-May are the best seasons to aerate, overseed and topdress with compost



## 5 Avoid using “weed & feed” and other pesticides. Use less-toxic alternatives

Pesticides include bug, disease, and weed killers, like “Weed & Feed”

- These products may damage soil and lawn health, and pollute our waterways
- Accept a few “weeds” in your lawn
- Crowd out weeds and reduce pest damage by growing a healthy, vigorous lawn
- Remove problem weeds by hand in the spring and fall
- Or spot-spray problem weeds with the least-toxic product
- Read product labels carefully, and follow the instructions

Call the Garden Hotline for safer weed and pest solutions



## Moss – managing it naturally

- Provide more sunlight – prune tree branches
- Use lime, and use natural organic fertilizers
- Replace lawns in shady areas with shade-loving native plants
- In spring or fall, rake out moss, then reseed and fertilize the bare spots



## 6 Consider alternatives to lawns in shady areas, on slopes, and near waterways

- Grass grows best on well-drained soil, in full sun or partial shade
- Save work: reduce lawn area. Try other planting beds, trees, and gardens
- Use “sheet mulching” to easily convert lawns to beds
- Leave a buffer of natural vegetation near streams and lakes

Call the Garden Hotline for plants that grow in shade, and fit your yard



# Lawn Care Calendar for Western Washington

## Spring (April-May)

- Mow regularly at 2-3", leave the clippings for free fertilizer
- If needed, fertilize mid-May
- Improve thin areas with aeration, overseeding, and topdressing with compost
- Pull weeds before they seed

## Summer (June-August)

- Water deeply, 1 inch per week, or let lawn go brown & dormant
- Mow less often as growth slows

## Fall (September-November)

- On thin areas, overseed & topdress with compost in Sept.
- If needed, apply organic fertilizer September-October, or slow-release synthetic until November
- Pull fall weeds before they seed
- Mow lower (1") the last time in fall

## Winter (December-March)

- Get mower blades sharpened before the spring rush
- Test soil once every 3 years to plan fertilizer & lime needs



## Learn more

**Questions?** Call the experts at the **Garden Hotline (206) 633-0224** (language interpretation available) or email from [www.GardenHotline.org](http://www.GardenHotline.org) – see videos and guides there too!

- Choose safer yard products and pest solutions [www.GrowSmartGrowSafe.org](http://www.GrowSmartGrowSafe.org)
- Pesticide disposal [www.hazwastehelp.org](http://www.hazwastehelp.org)
- Irrigation and water conservation [www.savingwater.org](http://www.savingwater.org)
- Lawn alternatives Call the Garden Hotline. For plant options see [www.GreatPlantPicks.org](http://www.GreatPlantPicks.org) or for native plants [www.kingcounty.gov/gonative](http://www.kingcounty.gov/gonative)
- Lawns, gardens, pest management and more Washington State University Extension <http://gardening.wsu.edu>
- More yard topics Seattle Public Utilities, Garden Hotline – see “Languages” for translations [www.GardenHotline.org](http://www.GardenHotline.org)



**When it comes to your lawn, act naturally!**

