

10 MOST COMMON LAWN CARE MISTAKES

Barbara J. Bromley, Mercer County Horticulturist 2013

1. SETTING THE STANDARD OF "PERFECT" FOR A LAWN

- "Perfect" is a nearly impossible standard for a lawn, especially if pesticides are not used regularly. Accepting a couple of weeds or a lawn with different shades of healthy green or the presence of a few insects is far more practical.
- Determine what you are willing to do/pay to have a very good, good, or fair turf.

2. FERTILIZING and LIMING IMPROPERLY

- Have a soil test run to determine need and amounts before liming or fertilizing. Retest about every 5 years.
- Do not fertilize low or medium maintenance lawns in summer. Cool season grasses do most of their growing in spring and fall. A summer fertilizer application when these grasses are not actively growing is not good for the lawn. (Only lawns that are irrigated regularly with clippings removed may need to be fertilized with a 100% slow release nitrogen fertilizer.)
- Remember that late summer/early fall the most important time of year to apply nutrients. Fertilizers applied in September stimulate a strong healthy root system. A proper potassium level helps the grasses survive winter.

3. LACK OF ATTENTION TO SOIL PREPARATION AND CARE

- Don't remove grass clippings.
- Improve soil to a depth of 6 inches or more prior to planting grass seed.
- Do not create soil layers by putting topsoil on top of the ground and not mixing it into existing soil.

4. IMPROPER MOWING

- Do not mow too short, a.k.a. "golf course syndrome" or maintain a regular mowing height below 2½ inches. That height should be the absolute minimum for home lawns. Golf greens mowed at 5/32 inch or the baseball field at 1¼" may look nice, but is impractical, stressful for the grass plants, and sets the homeowner up for a very high maintenance turf
- Try not to remove more than 1/3 of the grass blade at any mowing.
- Keep the mower blade sharp.

5. IMPROPER PESTICIDE USE

- Don't apply pesticides just because the neighbors are doing it, because you did it last year, or because it is part of a commercial 4-application program for lawns. Why would anyone apply pesticides that are not warranted?
- Read pesticide labels completely, so you don't miss valuable information. All of the information on a label is important, not just the rate of application.
- Don't apply a pesticide without a proper diagnosis. Know the pest you are treating for and the right time of application.
- Don't apply "cover" sprays unless the entire lawn is impacted by a pest. Treat only the area that is infested or infected, not the whole lawn. This reduces the probability of killing beneficial organisms and of excessive pesticide use.)
- Never apply herbicides (or any pesticide) on a windy day or just before heavy rains.

6. USING THE WRONG GRASSES FOR A GIVEN LOCATION OR MAINTENANCE PLAN

- Don't plant Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass in shady areas. Fine fescues and some tall fescue are much better adapted to reduced light. Use *Poa trivialis* in damp shade.
- Use blends of grass species and mixes of varieties. Blends and mixes lend much more diversity to a lawn and reduce the impact of insect and disease infestation.
- Plant pest resistant grasses. Ryegrasses and fescues containing endophytes are resistant to many turf feeding insects and some diseases. Many varieties of grasses have been selected for disease resistance.
- Plant wear-tolerant species in areas of high traffic. Use drought tolerant species where irrigation will not be used.

7. IMPROPER IRRIGATION

- Don't water in the late afternoon or early evening. Lawns should be watered in early morning to reduce the length of time the grass blades are wet which helps reduce disease problems.

8. TRYING TO "FORCE" GRASS TO GROW IN DENSE SHADE

- Consider alternatives to turf grasses in very shady sites where grasses seeded in late summer or fall decline and die by the next summer. There are mosses, ground covers and mulches that are better adapted to very shady locations than grasses.

9. ILL-TIMED PROGRAMS

- Don't seed in late fall or summer. Late August/early September (best) or early spring is a much more effective time of year to seed large areas of lawn.
- Don't rototill or spade wet soil. Working on or with wet soil causes compaction and clodding and destroys its structure.
- Try not to mow wet lawns. This has a tendency to spread disease and cause clippings to clump.
- Never apply pesticides or fertilizers to lawns suffering from heat or drought stress. Wait until conditions moderate.

10. NOT CONSULTING INFORMATION SOURCES

- Use reliable references. Consult your Rutgers Cooperative Extension office, Master Gardener Helpline, the internet, and libraries for cultural and other information about responsible lawn care.