

# RESIDENTIAL LAWN CARE: EXPECTATIONS and MANAGEMENT LEVELS

*For cool season grass lawns: bluegrass, fine and tall fescue, perennial rye*

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People have different standards for their lawns. Some want picture perfect and manicured; others want something the kids can play on, but aren't picky about appearances. Some neighborhoods "expect" their residents to maintain a certain quality level in keeping with everyone else's lawn. Some townhouse, condominium and other managed communities set standards that are acceptable to some, but not all, residents.

How do you go about determining what is necessary to maintain a certain appearance? Set your appearance standard for the lawn. Is perfect necessary? "Perfect" is a difficult and time-consuming level to attain, especially if pesticides are not used regularly. Accepting a few weeds or a lawn with different shades of green is easier to achieve and, in many cases, more practical. What grasses do you have or are you planning to plant? Low maintenance grasses on a high maintenance schedule or high maintenance grasses on a low maintenance schedule may decline or look unhealthy. Your determination of the amount of time and money you plan to spend will also help determine your maintenance level.

## • The high maintenance lawn (HML) characteristics

- Is primarily varieties of Kentucky bluegrass and/or perennial ryegrass, but may include improved turf-type tall fescues. May have been sodded originally with bluegrass or tall fescue sod. Areas containing undesirable grasses are killed with *glyphosate* (e.g. Roundup) and seeded or sodded with desirable grasses.
- All non-grass plants, including clover and yellow nutsedge, are unacceptable.
- Has a sunny or mostly sunny exposure and well-drained soil.
- Is usually irrigated regularly to apply 1-1 ½ inches per week during the growing season, either by installed irrigation system or by sprinklers to supplement natural rainfall.
- Often has the clippings removed for appearances, but this is neither necessary nor desirable.
- Is generally fertilized four or more times per year (3+ lb. N per 1000 square feet.). These may be applied as 4-step purchased fertilizer/pesticide programs or by the services of a commercial lawn company. The applications are generally made in March or early April, mid to late May, early September, and mid to late October. Irrigated HML can be given a half-rate application of a 100% organic nitrogen source in summer to maintain color. One fertilizer application may be eliminated if grass clippings are left on the lawn most of the time.
- Needs to be mowed at least once per week depending on the chosen mowing height. Lawns maintained at 1 ½ inches (short) should be mowed up to three times per week when actively growing in spring or fall so that no more than 1/3 of the grass blade is removed at one time.
- Pesticides are generally used. Biorational (less toxic to the environment) materials may be used instead of synthetics or toxic botanicals. Insecticides for surface and root-feeding insects and pre- and post-emergence herbicides are usually applied on a schedule, generally over the entire lawn. (Some may be applied as spot-treatments.) Fungicides can be used as needed.
- Heavier (clay-based) soils are aerated regularly. De-thatching is done as needed.
- Expected turf quality is very good to excellent.

## • The medium maintenance lawn (MML) characteristics

- Is generally turf-type tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass (lower maintenance varieties), fine fescues, or a combination of bluegrass and fine or turf-type tall fescue. May have small amount (up to 10% perennial rye during initial establishment).
- Weeds are generally removed or tolerated at low levels. Clover may be included in the seed mix or allowed to populate a lawn to fix nitrogen from the atmosphere and further reduce fertilizer needs.

- May be a sunny or partially to moderately shaded with good drainage. (If the area is poorly drained and shady, *Poa trivialis*, roughstalk bluegrass, is the only grass that survives these conditions.)
- Natural rainfall is relied on, so the **MML** is seldom irrigated. Water may be applied early in the growing season to prevent early dormancy or when seeding to enhance germination.
- Is fertilized two (or three if clippings are removed) times per year in May and September, or September and November or May, September, and November.
- Clippings should be left on the lawn to return nutrients to the soil and provide additional organic matter.
- Pesticide applications are generally, but not always, limited to spot treatments. Biorational (less toxic to the environment) materials may be used instead of synthetics, toxic botanicals, etc. An occasional application of an insecticide, such as a grub preventer, may be applied to the whole turf area. Tall fescues and perennial ryes containing endophytes can repel some insects and diseases, therefore reducing pesticide need.
- Mowing frequency is generally about once a week in periods of rapid growth. Mowing is infrequent or suspended completely during drought periods.
- Mowing height is 3 inches or higher, especially in hot weather.
- Aerating may be done on heavier clay soils. Dethatching is seldom necessary.
- Expected quality of turf is good to, sometimes, very good.

- **The low maintenance lawn (LML) characteristics**

- Is generally seeded with fine fescues or unimproved bluegrasses or tall fescues, but may have included both improved turf-type and unimproved coarse forage-type grasses. Will eventually become a mixture of many grasses as some grasses die and seeds of other grasses blow in or are dropped by birds and germinate. Improved perennial rye will generally not survive for long at this maintenance level. May include yellow nutsedge or grasses such as redtop, older tall fescue varieties, nimblewill, and bentgrass that would be undesirable at a higher maintenance level with a higher expectation for turf quality.
- Generally includes non-grass plants such as violets, ground ivy, and dandelions. Clover should be included in the original seed mix or allowed to populate a lawn to fix nitrogen from the atmosphere and further reduce fertilizer needs.
- Is in sun or partial to moderate shade.
- Relies only on natural rainfall. Never receives supplemental irrigation.
- Clippings are always (must be) left on the lawn to recycle nutrients.
- Is fertilized once a year (preferably September) or not at all for established hard fescue.
- Pesticides are generally not used.
- Mowing is “as needed” to maintain a tidy appearance. Mowing height should be 3-5 inches.
- Expected turf quality is fair.

- **Suggested for all maintenance levels:**

- Soil test to determine soil pH, limestone requirement, and nutrient levels. (The fertilizer analysis for a lawn fertilized only once a year is different than the analysis used on a lawn fertilized three or four times a year.)
- Lime all maintenance levels when the ground is not frozen or snow-covered to maintain a pH between 6.0 and 6.5.
- The most important fertilizing is in September for all levels.
- Use a mulching mower or blade and leave the clippings on the lawn most or all of the time. At all maintenance levels leaving the clippings returns nutrients and organic matter to the soil.
- Do not remove more than 1/3 to 1/2 of the grass blade at any mowing.
- Pick appropriate grasses for the site.
- Observe all of the requirements of the 2011 NJ Lawn Fertilizer law.