Natural Lawn Care

Is it possible to have a lush, green and healthy lawn without resorting to harmful chemicals? You bet! Understanding what conditions your lawn is growing in and what it needs to thrive is the key, as well as the correct techniques to maintain it. Once you have these concepts in hand, you will be able to free your lawn from its chemical dependency, contribute to a healthier environment, make it safe for kids and pets and enjoy a rich, green, plush carpet that accents your garden.

Grass Types:

The best lawn grasses for the Puget Sound area are blends of cool season grasses, generally some combination of fescues, ryegrass, and bluegrass. Combinations will change slightly depending on sun or shade conditions, as some grasses are more shade tolerant than others. However, no turf grass will grown well in heavily shaded conditions, so if there is an area of your garden that receives considerable shade throughout the day, you may want to consider some sort of lawn alternative, either groundcovers or other types of plants, and reserve your lawn areas for a sunnier situation.

Because the best turf grasses that grow in our area are cool season grasses, they grow best in the cooler temperatures of spring and fall and want to go dormant during the heat and dryness of summer. While you can water heavily during the summer to maintain their greenness, it is not necessary, is rather wasteful and may even be prohibited during periods of extended drought. Not to worry! Although you may be concerned about the dry, brownish appearance of the lawn during the heat of summer, minimal watering (1 inch per week)is sufficient to keep the lawn alive and that rich, green color will return rapidly with cooler temperatures and the increases rains of fall.

Soils:

As with any other plant, lawn grasses will grow best in soils that are loose, well-draining and have sufficient organic matter. Unfortunately, many existing lawns are growing in compacted soils and those that have been depleted of organic matter. And many newer lawns in recent developments also growing in inferior soils, often those that have had the topsoil stripped away during construction and with only a small amount of new soil of questionable quality added to serve as a bed for seed or sod.

So if you are not able to carefully prepare the soil base before planting a lawn, how to do you correct for poor soils in lawns that are already existing? One way is to start over. Till up the old lawn, or if excessively weedy, you may want to use a sod striper and remove it and the weeds entirely. Add at least 2 inches of quality compost like Espoma Mushroom

Compost or EB Stone Planting Compost and till it in to a depth of 6-8 inches. Test for soil pH – lawns grow best in a soil with a nearly neutral pH (7.0). If pH is 6.5 or less, you will need to add lime according to package directions to neutralize the pH. Rake the soil level carefully, providing a very slight decline away from the house, and roll with a landscape roller to even out any indentations. Water well, rake again and allow the soil to settle for a day and then seed or lay sod. Water daily until the seed has germinated or the sod has taken, generally around two weeks during April and May (or in September, another good lawn care month).

If you don't wish to go to the effort of starting over, you will need to aerate the lawn. This involves removing small plugs of soil from the lawn to allow oxygen to penetrate. This can be done manually or with a motorized aerator available at any rental store. Once the plugs have been removed, rake to break them up and topdress with fine screened compost or quality planting mix to improve soil conditions and provide needed organic matter. This will serve to loosen compacted soils, provide deeper penetration of both oxygen and water and help to create a better and deeper root system for the lawn grasses. Overseeding to thicken the lawn may be done at this point.

Fertilizing:

We tend to fall victim to the marketing hype of many fertilizer manufacturers that promote the idea that regular and frequent fertilizing is the key to having a healthy lawn. This is simply not so. And like kids and junk food, synthetic chemical fertilizers may produce the equivalent of a "sugar high" for your lawn, greening it up quickly and promoting rapid, but unsustained growth. Organic, slow release fertilizers, like EB Stone Lawn Food or Soil Science Emerald City, feed the lawn by feeding the soil with a combination or organic products that stimulate natural soil organisms. These very important little critters are the workhorses of the soil, breaking down needed plant nutrients into soluble components that are taken up by the lawn roots. This process takes place over time, so an application of organic fertilizer, according to package directions, once in spring and again fall is sufficient to provide all the nutrients your lawn needs to be green and healthy.

Weeds and Other Lawn Problems:

A few weeds are not a bad thing. Lawns are monocultures or single species planting and do not exist in nature. It is perfectly natural for these types of plantings to become populated with other plant species, generally what we consider to be weeds. Clover, a very common lawn "weed", is used to be a common component of lawn seed mixes. Tolerance should be considered when evaluating the weediness of you lawn – some weeds look good and may actually improve the appearance of your lawn during the summer. Tame problem weeds like dandelions and leave the others.

Remove problem weeds in spring or fall, when they are most prevalent. Hand weeding using tools designed for this purpose is relatively simple. Or use a spot spray for very persistent problems. A number of organic products are available for this technique or you can use corn gluten meal, a natural pre-emergent herbicide used to prevent excessive seeding of weeds. Corn gluten is also a fertilizer source, so use of this product will also increase soil fertility as well as retard weed development. And remember that a thick, healthy lawn is the best weed control, as it will very effectively crown out weeds.

Insect problems in lawns in the Northwest tend to be limited to crane flies and even these are mostly insignificant. Crane fly larvae feed on lawn roots in fall and early spring, but the adults are most prevalent in midsummer. They are encouraged by wet lawns so backing off on summer watering is an excellent form of control. Generally, populations of larvae are not sufficient to do much damage. If you suspect crane fly damage, usually indicated by brown bare patches, a simple test can determine if additional controls should be used. Cut a 12" by 12" patch in your lawn, leaving one side intact. Roll the sod back to expose the roots and underlying soil and count the number of grayish white grubs you see. If the count exceeds 35 per square foot, then you may have a problem. If the count is less, it is recommended that no additional controls be used as birds will typically take care of the problem. The use of beneficial nematodes, an organic biocontrol, applied in late spring once the soil temperature has reached 50F and again in early fall, will rapidly rectify the problem.

There are any number of lawn diseases, usually fungi in nature, but most result from improper lawn care. If care is given to proper mowing and watering techniques, they will not be a problem and should not require further attention.

Maintenance:

Next to good soil conditions, maintenance – proper mowing and watering techniques – is the key to a healthy, natural lawn. In our climate, except for the coldest part of winter, mowing should be virtually a year-round activity. You do not want the lawn to grow too high – this encourages fungi problems in our damp spring and fall – neither do you want to cur the grass too short, allowing weeds to readily colonize. Keep the lawn at a height of 3" for optimum health. And consider investing a mulching mower. Studies have shown that mulching mowers significantly reduce thatch build-up and reduce the need for additional fertilizing, as the finely chopped blades of grass rapidly decompose and add nutrients back to the soil. And mulching mowers reduce the amount of waste we add to landfills. Regardless of the type of mower you use, keep the blades sharp.

Improper watering is probably the biggest problem we have with maintaining a healthy lawn, not to mention creating an enormous drain on a limited natural resource. Water infrequently bur deeply. This encourages the roots of lawn grasses to penetrate deeply

into the soil, loosening it as well developing a much greater resistance to our summer drought. If possible, allow your lawn to go dormant in summer, providing only an inch of water per week to maintain it. If you have an automatic sprinkler system, adjust the timing so that it comes on only twice a week for no less than 30 minutes at a time rather than daily for 5-10 minutes. This only tickles the surface of the soil and does not allow for water penetration down to 6-8 inches, the depth preferred for healthy root systems. And water early in the day so that the lawn will dry before evening, reducing the possibility of fungal problems as well as the amount of evaporation that will occur before the water even reaches the soil.

Highlights of Natural Lawn Care:

- Avoid compacted, infertile soils by aerating and topdressing seasonally with screened compost.
- Fertilize in spring and fall using an organic product that will provide sustained growth throughout the growing season and encourage populations of beneficial soil organisms.
- Exercise tolerance of some weeds and use manual weeding techniques or spot spraying for very persistent problems. Avoid “weed and feed” formulations that contribute heavily to pollution and that can be harmful to kids, pets, and wildlife.
- Mow high and often, keeping lawns at about 3 inches.
- Water infrequently but deeply, encouraging the roots of lawn grasses to grow deeply into the soil.
- Remember that a thick, healthy lawn is your best defense against weeds, insects, diseases and drought.

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