

# Organic Lawn Care

Bad lawns usually are the result of a lot of little things that aren't being done instead of one or two big things that have gone wrong. That's why the first step in "going organic" is getting in the habit of doing a lot of little things right. These include:

- Cutting the grass high. Move the mower setting up to cut at a height of 2 ½ to 3 inches and never let the grass get so long that you have to remove more than the top one-third of the blades at a time. Taller grass shades out weeds, slows soil moisture evaporation and provides more chlorophyll to make plant sugars that grass needs to grow.
- Let the clippings lie. They'll break down and add nitrogen to the soil. Only rake if the clippings are thick enough to mat down the grass.
- Improve the soil. Lawns very often are started on poor or thin soil. It'll help to build up the soil by adding a light quarter-inch top dressing of compost or peat moss every now and then. The decaying grass clippings also gradually will add humus.
- Add "good" grass. Overseed the lawn every year or two in September with newer turfgrass varieties that have been bred for bug- and disease-resistance. This will gradually introduce the improved varieties into your lawn. For new lawns, start with a mix that contains these better grasses.
- Core-aerate every year or two to reduce soil compaction.
- Dethatch if there's an inch or more of thatch atop the soil. Thatch is a matted layer of dead roots and stems that tends to build up in lawns that have been shallowly watered, fed with fertilizers high in water-soluble nitrogen and/or mowed too closely. Organically fed lawns tend to be less prone to thatch buildup.
- Don't water in a drought. Let the lawn go dormant unless you have a new lawn or the drought persists more than 6 or 8 weeks. Then soak the lawn deeply so the soil is damp at least 6 inches down. Frequent, shallow watering encourages surface roots that are more prone to drought death and thatch buildup.

## An organic feeding plan

Start your switch to organics by doing a soil test. We have do-it-yourself Penn State mail-in kits that are inexpensive and easy to do. Results are usually back within a week or two.

Next, stop applying insecticides, herbicides and fungicides unless you actually have a problem. Regularly use only an organic fertilizer, such as Espoma Organic Lawn Food.

Your soil-test result will help you decide which fertilizer to use, how much and whether to add lime or any other soil nutrients or amendments.

Usually, two feedings per year are enough - one in mid to late April and one in September. That's especially true if you're letting the clippings break down on the lawn. Penn State turfgrass researchers say that's the equivalent amount of nitrogen of a third feeding.

## What about weeds?

Organic fertilizing won't make weeds magically disappear. But if you do all of the above "good" things, your lawn should fill in and become thick enough that you'll have fewer and fewer weeds. If grass already is occupying the space, there's no room for a new weed to get started.

Another strategy is to prevent weeds from sprouting by applying a natural product called corn gluten meal. This byproduct of corn milling has been found to shut down the growth of most weed seedlings before you ever see them while adding nitrogen to the soil at the same time. It's sold as Concern "Weed Prevention Plus" or Espoma Weed Preventer.

Once weeds are up, bigger ones can be hand-pulled or dug and spreading ones can be raked out. Or if weeds are becoming an eyesore and you don't mind occasional chemical use, they can be killed with a spot-spray of herbicide, Espoma Earth-tone 4 in 1 Weed Control.

That's all there is to it. If you have any questions, give us a call. We're glad to help!