

Summer Lawn Care - Mowing, Fertilizing, Watering and Diseases

Summer in South Texas can be a tough time for grass. Keeping your lawn looking good requires following a few simple maintenance steps. Also, proper lawn maintenance virtually eliminates most disease problems.

Mowing. The best time to mow your grass is about 4 hours after you have irrigated. Mowing your grass after irrigation, or a good rainfall, will make for an upright grass plant that will cut better and will give a more uniform cut appearance. However, improper mowing height is one of the chief mistakes many South Texas gardeners make. Mowing the grass too short, in order to mow less often, can often cause serious problems for your grass, problems which may end up causing more work in the long run. Mowing grass too short can cause both a thin turf, that is not only unsightly, but allows the sun to reach the soil and dry out your grass, and makes for a shallow weak, rooting system. Stressing your lawn by mowing it too short lowers the grasses natural resistance to both drought and disease, and makes it easier for weeds to find bare soil to become established. Your lawn needs those blades of grass to manufacture its food for both growth and fighting pests.

Removing more than two inches at once will cause severe shock to your lawn. The solution - mow often enough that you remove no more than 1 to 1 1/2 inches of grass height at one time. Carpet grass, or St. Augustine or Floratam grass should not be mowed closer than 2 inches above the soil. Bermuda grass can be mowed a little closer, as short as 1 inch. Mowing your grass in the summer at taller heights will provide you a lawn that is healthier and better able to resist weed invasions, heat and diseases.

Also be sure that your lawn mower blades are sharp. Check to see that blades of grass are cut smoothly and cleanly across. Dull mower blades will give a rough, jagged edge, leaving the grass tips to dry out, die back and make your entire lawn look brown. Mowing properly is the easiest way to keep your lawn looking good and to promote good health all year long.

Fertilizing. Many lawn owners think that fertilizing grass during the long hot summer will either burn their lawns, or cause it to grow rapidly. This is not so, as long as fertilizers are applied at the recommended strength, and watered in properly. One exception to this rule is the use of heat-activated, time-release fertilizers, which can release all at once if the temperature rises above 90 degrees F. If a time-release fertilizer is used, be sure that it is water-released, rather than heat-activated. During the summer grass is going to grow whether you fertilize or not. The difference is that growth of an under fertilized lawn will likely be pale, sickly, and yellowish, rather than lush and dark green. A fertilized lawn which is lush will require less water because the grass blades shade the soil and cool the roots thus, reducing water evaporation and transpiration. Heavy watering of an under fertilized lawn continues to make a poor looking lawn even worse, because watering will leach many of the essential nutrients out of

the top twelve inches of soil, and nutrients in this depth of soil are the only ones available to the plant. Remember your grass needs food to survive the stress of summer. Be sure to use a complete fertilizer, one that contains nitrogen, phosphorus and potash (N,P,K) and which contains iron and other essential micronutrients. See your qualified nursery experts for a good fertilizer.

Watering. Watering depends on both the type of grass you are growing, either bermuda or carpet grass, and time of day. The correct time of day to water is when temperatures are rising. Only with rising temperatures can grass take up water. Here in South Texas, the best time would be just after sun up, watering at this time of day solves two problems. First, air temperatures in the morning are at their lowest, so loss of water due to high temperature evaporation is minimal. Second, watering in the morning when temperatures are starting to rise will eliminate high humidity conditions at the soil level (which occur with evening or night waterings) and will virtually eliminate fungus, a disease dependent upon high humidity.

The type of grass you have dictates different water schedules. Bermuda needs to be watered once every 2 weeks with 4 inches of water. It is recommended that you water bermuda for one-half hour on and off until 4 inches is applied. To determine the amount of water your system is giving, place a straight-edged container, like a tuna can, in your lawn, turn on your system, wait one-half hour and measure the depth of water in the container. Carpet grass needs to be watered every week with 2 inches of water at a time or enough water to wet 1 foot into your soil, as the roots of this grass grow that deep.

Disease. One of the worst disease problems here in the Valley is a fungus called Grass Leaf Spot or Melting Out. In hot weather, when the humidity is high, this fungus can kill the grass blades, spread to the base of the next plant, and kill the entire lawn. Melting Out is characterized by the grass turning brown and thinning out in rough patches of 2 or more feet in diameter. The grass blade, whether dead or alive will have small oval spots with straw-colored centers and dark maroonish borders. A lawn under stress from short mowings is the most susceptible. Brown Patch, is another disease which causes the grass to die out in patches from a few inches to a few feet in diameter. It is characterized by dark, purplish rings of grass at the leading edge of the patch of dead grass. Both of these diseases are treatable with Procide granular fungicide or Daconil liquid fungicide. Begin treatment at the first sign of disease and repeat with three more applications 7 days apart. Also, spray the blade of your lawnmower with a disinfectant like Lysol, since the fungus spore on the mower blade can re-infect your lawn. Treating a lawn that has fungal disease can be slow and expensive.

The key to prevention is mow regularly but not too much at one time, use a complete fertilizer and water properly.

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Article written by the Cameron County Horticulture Education Committee.

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