

Monthly Steps to a Healthy Lawn

A bit of planning and healthy lawn care practices will reduce or eliminate the need for pesticides.

MARCH / APRIL (snowmelt)

- **Sharpen mower blades**
- Don't walk on soggy "spongy" lawns, this will cause compaction and could increase the spreading of disease.
- Once dry, rake your lawn gently to remove debris and dead grass; it is also important to **test your soil** every few years.
- **Aerate** if soil is compacted; compaction is generally seen in high traffic areas.
- Inspect for dead patches (salt or pet damage); apply gypsum to damaged areas & **top dress** soil.
- **Overseed**; consider White Dutch Clover in your **grass seed mix** it provides nitrogen and tolerates drought.
- Plan to convert shady areas (less than 4 hours sun) to alternative ground covers.

MAY

- **Top dress or fertilize** and **over seed** if you have not already done so.
- **Mow high** and after mowing **grass cycle**.
- **Scout for weeds**; pull by hand and fix bare patches by adding **compost** and **overseeding** (grass seed mix).
- **Monitor** for insect damage; see White Grub fact sheet.

JUNE

- Continue to scout for and identify weeds; they are a great indicator of soil requirements; see Weeds fact sheet.
- Hand pull weeds; fill in bare patches with **compost** and **grass seed mix**; keep moist until germinated.
- At the end of the month as grass growth slows, reduce mowing frequency; **grass cycle**.
- **Monitor** for heat stress, insects and disease.

JULY /AUGUST

- Continue to **scout for weeds** and hand pull – weeds are easier to pull after a rain or deep watering.
- **Water wisely**.
- In August **scout** for chinch bug damage: see Chinch bug fact sheet.

LATE AUGUST/ SEPTEMBER (best time to prepare lawn for a green spring)

- **De-thatch** and **aerate** if necessary – best done in high-traffic areas.
- Apply 0.5 cm of **compost** or apply **slow release organic fertilizer**.
- **Reseed** bare patches or **overseed** entire lawn with good grass mixture if it looks spindly.
- if drought continues into fall, **water wisely**; 1" (2 cm) of water per week (one full tuna can).

OCTOBER

- Chop fallen leaves with mulching mower; leave ¼" (0.5 cm) as **mulch** and compost the rest.
- Hand pull weeds after a rain.
- In early October fertilize with a good **slow release fertilizer**.
- Minimize your lawn area by replacing it with ground covers, native species, shrubs and trees.

NOVEMBER

- Cut grass one last time at a height of 2" (5 cm), leave mulched leaves and grass clippings on lawn.
- Service lawnmower and sharpen blades.
- Plan to minimize salt damage next year by using bird seed or sand to de-ice.



Glossary

Aerate: This will help loosen compacted soil, and allow water & nutrients to penetrate. Use a garden fork, rent a core aerator or contract a lawn care company to do this for you. Aeration is needed the most in high-traffic areas.

Compost: A natural source of nutrients that also provides organic material to soil. Compost contains beneficial microbes that help break down thatch and inhibit pests. Increasing the organic matter of soil with compost provides the lawn with its nutrients slowly and avoids pollution through excess runoff.

Dethatch: Thatch can become a problem by impeding water and nutrient movement if greater than 1/2" (1 cm). Thatch can harbour turf insects such as chinch bugs. You can use a rake, rent a machine or contract a lawn care company to do this for you in the autumn. Compost removed thatch.

Grass cycle: Leave grass clippings on lawn; it is a great natural fertilizer. It adds nitrogen and decreases the amount of fertilizer you need to apply overall.

Mow high: Place mower setting at a height of 2 1/2" to 3" (8 cm), cut less than 1/3 of blade height each time. Longer grass blades moderates soil temperature, lessens moisture loss and crowds out weeds. It also provides more leaf surface, deeper roots and helps lawn recover from stress. Mow when turf is dry, mowing when grass is wet causes compaction and could spread disease.

Mulch: Using a mulching mower, fall leaves can be cut up very small and left on the lawn, adding nutrients to the soil.

Over seed with grass seed mixture: Turf with a mixture of grasses will tolerate insect, disease and drought more readily than a single variety (monoculture) lawn. It will create a lush thick lawn that helps crowd out weeds. A good time to over seed lawns is in the fall using a mix of perennial rye-grass and fine fescues. If this was not done last fall, top dress and reseed bare patches in spring.

Reseed: This requires seeding bare patches with a mixture of grasses. It will decrease the chance of weeds occupying that space and will create a lush looking lawn.

Sharp mower blades: Tearing the grass with dull mower blades stresses the plant and encourages turf diseases.

Slow release fertilizer: Provides the lawn with nutrients slowly overtime and avoids groundwater pollution through excess runoff. The best time to fertilize is in the spring or fall when the grass builds its roots.

Soil: Grasses generally prefer a minimum topsoil depth of 4 to 6 inches of rich sandy loam and at least 5% organic matter. Over time, this rich topsoil layer can be accomplished by topdressing with compost annually.

Test your soil: This will tell you the pH and nutrient levels of your lawn so you can make adjustments to produce a healthier lawn; a pH between 6.0 and 7.0 is best for healthy grass growth.

Top dress: with compost 1/4" (0.5 cm), after top dressing you should be able to see the tops of the grass blades. Compost enriches the soil by adding organic matter and provides food for worms; worms loosen and aerate the soil for air and water to penetrate and build strong grass root systems.

Water wisely: Watering during summer heat and drought is not essential for turf health. In hot dry spells, allow grass to go dormant (turn brown) and don't cut until it recovers after a fall rain - a healthy lawn will recover. If you chose to water, water deep and seldom: a lawn only needs 1" (2 cm) of water per week to stay healthy.

Call the **Yard Improvement Helpline** at **905-540-8787 ext. 18** for tips on natural lawn and garden care.

Visit www.naturallyhamilton.ca for links to the Ontario Pesticide Ban.

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