When to Fertilize

For young lawns (less than 10-15 years old)
- Memorial Day
- Independence Day
- Labor Day

For older lawns (regularly fertilized for 10-15 years) and shady lawns
- Memorial Day
- Labor Day

For lawns where clippings are removed
- Memorial Day
- Independence Day
- Labor Day
- Early October

Choosing a Fertilizer

3 numbers on all fertilizers
- 1st is the percent of nitrogen (N). Lawns need more N than other nutrients.
- 2nd is the percent of phosphorus (P). Usually 0 because it is banned except for new lawns or if a soil test shows a deficiency.
- 3rd is the percent of potassium (K). Should be 0 because it is only needed if soil test shows deficiency.

Read the label
- Nitrogen should be 25-50% insoluble (slow-release).
- Green-up is slower but lasts longer (2 months or more).

Organic fertilizers have mostly slow-release nitrogen
- Very slowly available – only 25-50% in 2 years.
- Lawn will be less green compared to conventionally fertilized lawns for the first few years.

For More Information

UW-Extension Horticulture Team
http://hort.uwex.edu

UW Extension Publications:
http://learningstore.uwex.edu • 1-877-WIS-PUBS
- Organic and reduced-risk lawn care (A3958)
- Do-it-yourself alternative lawn care (A3964)
- Lawn Fertilization (A2303)
- Watering your lawn (A3950)
- Growing Grass in Shade (A3700)
- Lawn Establishment and Renovation (A3434)
- Lawn Maintenance (A3435)
- Lawn Aeration and Topdressing (A3710)
- Lawn Weed Prevention and Control (A1990)
- Sampling Lawn & Garden Soils for Soil Testing (A2166)

UW-Extension Horticulture Help Lines
Milwaukee County 414-256-4664
Waukesha County 262-548-7779

UW-Extension Horticulture Center
at Boerner Botanical Gardens
in Whitnall Park, Hales Corners, WI

Become a Master Gardener Volunteer

Milwaukee County UW-Extension Office
414-256-4600
http://fyi.uwex.edu/sewmg
9501 W Watertown Plank Rd., Building A
Wauwatosa, WI 53226-3552

Waukesha County UW-Extension Office
262-548-7770
http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cnty/waukesha
515 W Moreland Blvd., AC-G22
Waukesha, WI 53188

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Making Choices

Organic Lawn Care

- Uses only natural products for fertilizing and controlling weeds, insects and diseases.
- Emphasizes soil care including topdressing with compost and core aerating twice a year.
- Weeds are hand-pulled or dug. Organic herbicides exist but not many. Repeat applications are usually needed.
  - Corn gluten meal is a pre-emergent but is not organic if derived from genetically modified corn.
  - Vinegar, soaps, and plant oils burn leaves of weeds and grass but not the roots so they will re-grow.
  - Chelated iron herbicides will selectively burn many broadleaf weeds, and will not harm the grass.
- Organic insecticides and fungicides exist but not many.

Challenges

- Products usually expensive, less effective and need repeated applications.
- May be labor intensive.
- There are no official standards for organic lawn care.
- Difficult to get results comparable to those of conventional lawn care on a large scale.

Topdress by evenly spreading up to 1" of high quality compost

- Use composted manure and other fertilizers may not be needed.
- Composted yard waste is lower in nitrogen.

Core aerate to mix-in the compost and help soil “breathe”

- Cores should be as deep as possible.
- Vertical impact machines go deeper than drum types.
- Leave “cores” on lawn.
- Easier when soil is moist.

Conventional Lawn Care

- Can use any of the full range of synthetic products for fertilizing and controlling weeds, insects and diseases.
- Products are highly effective and less expensive than organic.
- Synthetic products pose an acceptable amount of risk when used properly according to the EPA.
- This approach often produces the highest quality lawn for lowest price.

Reduced-Risk Lawn Care

- An organic-based system that is less strict and allows occasional use of low-risk synthetic products listed on the EPA reduced-risk program.
- Most reduced risk products are only available to lawn care providers and other professional turf managers.
- Uses the same good soil care as organic lawn care including topdressing and core aerating twice a year.
- More vinegar, soap and oil products are allowed for weed control than for organic lawn care.
- Can produce a high quality lawn for a modest increase in price compared to conventional.

Mowing

- Set mower as high as possible - ideally, 3 - 4”.
- Leave clippings to return nutrients to soil.
- Do not cut off more than 1/3 of height at once.
* Sharpen your mower blade often.

Watering

- Keep lawn dense by watering to prevent dormancy during drought.
- Provide 1” of water all at once weekly.
- Time the collection of 1” in straight-sided containers under the sprinkler.
- Water less in shade.
* Water early so leaves dry quickly before disease-causing fungus infects leaves.

Fertilizing

- Keeps lawn dense which reduces weeds.
- Choose fertilizers with at least 25-50% slow-release nitrogen.
- Apply at proper times for the age and light levels of your lawn. Fertilize less in shade.
- Apply just before it rains or water-in.
- Weed and feed separately for proper timing of both.

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