FERTILIZE THE LAWN

With the warmer days and spring showers amongst us, it is time to wake up the lawns from their winter slumber. A good dose of fertilizer is just what they need to jolt them into life again. Now is the time to do so.

A regular fertilization is essential for growing a healthy, beautiful lawn. It is especially important in Florida because of the infertile sandy soils. The sandy soils cannot hold nutrients as well as rich, organic soils that are found in other areas of the country. Not only is fertilization used to maintain good-quality lawns; it can also be used to improve poor-quality lawns. Of course, efficient mowing, watering, and pest control must be combined with proper fertilization to produce a healthy lawn.

A lawn fertilization schedule is easy to plan. Only three basic questions need to be answered: Which essential nutrients need to be supplied? What type of fertilizer should be used? How much fertilizer should be applied and how often? Fortunately for us, the University of Florida, IFAS researchers have already determined an effective and efficient fertilization schedule.

In February a complete fertilizer should be applied to the lawn. A complete fertilizer is one that has a formula made up of the three essential nutrients, nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K). The three numbers on the fertilizer bag represent the percentages of these nutrients that the bag contains.

A fertilizer with the analysis 16-4-8 or similar ratio is recommended. One pound of nitrogen should be applied for every 1000 square feet of lawn. A 50-pound bag of 16-4-8 contains 16% nitrogen or 8 pounds total nitrogen. This bag will fertilize 8000 square feet at the rate of 1 pound of nitrogen per 1000 square feet at this rate. Higher fertilization rates are unnecessary and will produce a faster buildup of thatch than lower rates. A slow-release of nitrogen should be applied again at the same rate in May and July, with another complete fertilizer application in October.

If the lawn starts to turn yellow between fertilizer applications, it is most likely a sign that it needs iron. For iron deficiency, spray ferrous sulfate (2 ounces in 3 to 5 gallons of water per 1000 square feet) or a chelated iron source (refer to the label for rates). Iron applications every 6 weeks will help maintain green color and, unlike nitrogen, will not promote excessive growth, decreasing the frequency the lawn needs to be mowed.

By following these fertilization schedules, you can produce a lush, green, healthy lawn. Research has shown that these schedules are effective. Some individuals insist on fertilizing more than recommended. Over fertilization can be detrimental to lawns. Over fertilization causes lawns to push out new growth almost continuously.

Continuous growth creates green lawns, but also creates weak growth that is highly susceptible to insects and diseases. For example, chinch bugs love new growth in St. Augustine lawns. Over fertilized lawns also need mowed and watered more frequently and excess fertilizer that is not consumed by the lawns is washed away into our waterways, causing unnecessary pollution.

For more information on lawn fertilization and care, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They have extended their Plant Clinic hours. They will now be available to take your calls, Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm. Call them at (321) 697-3000 with all your plant questions.

Looking for an educational adventure for your child over spring break? The Junior Master Gardener Program will be held the week of March 17th from 9am to 3pm. It is a hands-on day camp to teach children in 3rd through 8th grades about gardening, leadership, and volunteerism. Deadline for applications is February 28th. Please call for more details.
The "Osceola County Garden School" begins the end of February and will be held Tuesday and Thursday evenings for three weeks. You are welcome to come to one seminar or attend all six. "Creating the Perfect Lawn" and "Florida Yards and Neighborhoods" are the topics for February 25th and 27th. Please call for more information on the topics held each day and to register. There is no cost for the classes.

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