HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

FERTILIZING THE LAWN

With warmer days already here and spring showers just around the corner, 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.

Regular fertilization is essential for growing a healthy, beautiful lawn. It is especially important in Florida because of the infertile, sandy soils. A majority of Florida soils cannot hold nutrients as well as the rich, organic soils found in other parts of the country. Not only is fertilization used to maintain good-quality lawns, it can 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 determined an effective and efficient fertilization schedule.

In late February or early March, a compete fertilizer should be applied to the lawn. A complete fertilizer 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 it contains.

A fertilizer with a 16-4-8, or similar, ratio is recommended, with at least 30% of the nitrogen source to be slow-release. Slow-release nitrogen sources often provide color and growth for 60 days or more. Using this type of product, you would fertilize every 60 to 75 days at 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. These fertilizer sources are environmentally safer, because they are less likely to leach nitrogen into ground or surface water.

A 50 pound bag of 16-4-8 contains 16%, or 8 pounds, total nitrogen. This bag will fertilize 8,000 square feet at a rate of 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. Higher fertilization rates are unnecessary and will produce a faster buildup of thatch. Always irrigate fertilizer with a ¼ inch of water. This will move the fertilizer from the leaf blade to the root, where it will be taken up. Do not fertilize if rain is forecast in the next 24 hours. Slow releases of nitrogen should be applied at the same rate in May and July, with another complete application in October.

If the lawn starts to turn yellow between 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 1,000 square feet) or a chelated iron source (refer to the label for rates). Iron applications every six 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 people insist on fertilizing more often than recommended. Overfertilization can be detrimental to lawns. It causes lawns to push out new growth almost continuously.

Continuous growth creates green lawns but also 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 mowing and watering more frequently. In addition, excess fertilizer is washed away into our waterways, causing pollution.

For more information on lawn fertilization and care, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They are available to take your calls Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Call 321-697-3000.

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