Spring is my favorite time of the year. With the warmer days we have been experiencing, our landscape plants and lawns have begun to wake from their winter slumber. Fresh new leaves on the trees and beautiful flowers adorn the landscapes around town. The only plant I cringe to when it wakes from winter sleep is the lawn, because that means that I also will have to wake up my lawnmower from its winter slumber. However, this springtime awaken of the lawn and lawnmower indicates that it is time to fertilize the lawn and provide it with the nutrients it needs to continue to grow and be healthy all season.

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 areas of the country. Fertilization not only helps to maintain good-quality lawns; using it can improve poor-quality lawns. Of course, combining efficient mowing, watering, and pest control with proper fertilization, helps to produce a healthy lawn.

A lawn fertilization schedule is easy to plan. Only three basic questions need answering. Which are the essential nutrients that you need to add? What type of fertilizer do you need to use? How much fertilizer should be applied and how often? Fortunately, the University of Florida, IFAS researchers have already determined an effective and efficient fertilization schedule.

In early spring, apply a complete fertilizer 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 are contained in the bag.

Apply the fertilizer in multiple (2-5) applications yearly, depending on what variety of turfgrass you have and how much maintenance you desire. With each fertilizer application, add ½ to 1 lb. of N. It is highly recommended that at least 30% of the nitrogen come from a slow-release source. To find out how much of the common fertilizer types this relates to, go to http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP221.

For example, a fertilizer with the analysis 15-2-15 and 30% slow-release nitrogen will often provide color and growth for 60 days or more. If using this type of product, you would only fertilize every 60-75 days at a rate of 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. These slow-release fertilizer sources are safer environmentally, since they are less likely to leach nitrogen into ground or surface water.

A 50-pound bag of 15-2-15 contains 15% nitrogen or 7.5 pounds total nitrogen. This bag will fertilize over 2,200 square feet at the rate of 1 pound of nitrogen per 1000 square feet.
Higher fertilization rates are unnecessary and will produce a faster buildup of thatch than. Always irrigate fertilizer in with ¼ inch of water, moving the fertilizer from the leaf blade to the root, which takes it up. If the forecast calls for rain in the next 24 hours, do not fertilize. Apply a slow-release of nitrogen 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 mowing. 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, causing 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 mowing and watering more frequently. Excess fertilizer not consumed washes away into our waterways, causing unnecessary pollution.

For more information on lawn fertilization and care, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They are available to take your calls on Monday thru Friday from 10am to 2pm. Call (321) 697-3000 with all your plant questions.

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