

## WARM WINTER TEMPS AND LAWN CARE

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When warmer than average temperatures occur in February and March, it might be difficult to assess when to begin lawn care. As a rule, allow turfgrass to come out of dormancy naturally and begin growth before starting most care.

Removing debris, like twigs and litter, and raking and recycling tree leaves are good lawn practices for March. If soils are wet, limit foot traffic to prevent harmful soil compaction.

While later than ideal, now is the time to service lawn mowers and sharpen mower blades so they're ready for the spring growth surge. Dull mower blades tear grass tips giving it an off appearance.

Don't begin mowing too early as this can stimulate growth. While we look forward to plants greening up in spring, too early growth can stress plants. Waiting allows soil temperatures to warm and be more conducive for root functions.

Mowing is not needed prior to grass greening up and starting growth. The first mowing should be done once green grass is tall enough to require mowing. Mow at a height of three to three and a half inches from the first mowing of the season to the last.

There is no need to mow low in spring. This is considered scalping and can lead to root loss. It also exposes weed seed to sunlight to germinate. If it remains dry and windy, a low mowing height may further expose plant crowns to desiccation injury.

Whenever possible, leave clippings on the lawn. Grass clippings do not contribute to thatch. As they decompose, they slowly increase organic matter and nutrients in soil.

Fertilizing should also be held off until growth begins. The window of April 20 to May 5 is considered a good time to begin fertilizing in eastern Nebraska; with waiting until later being fine. This timing is ideal for do it yourselfers to follow.

Many fertilizers sold as weed and feed products are applied for crabgrass control. The window of April 20 to May 5 is also good timing for such products. Applied at this time, they provide an adequate season of control with one application.

Power raking and core aeration are best avoided until growth begins. These practices, especially power raking or dethatching, can be hard on turf. Active growth is needed to help lawns recover. Both practices are best done in September, but April is a good time if soils are not too wet.

Core aeration removes plugs to help reduce soil compaction and promote root growth. It is a great practice for lawns and could be done annually. It should be done at least once every three years.

Power raking is only needed if the true thatch layer exceeds one-half inch. True thatch is a reddish brown mat of dead roots and rhizomes found between soil and green grass. Some thatch is beneficial in insulating plant crowns from extreme temperatures and foot traffic.

Seeding bare or thin areas is best done as early in April as possible for young grass to establish prior to hot summer temperatures. Avoid the use of preemergent herbicides, unless the produce is labeled for use on new seedings.

To increase success with overseeding, seed to soil contact is important. This is one time we recommend mowing lower than usual. Follow that with three to four passes with a core aerator to create holes for seed to drop into.

Avoid purchasing cheap seed or seed in bulk bins. The germination rates can be lower on these and weed seeds are often introduced through the use of noncertified seed.