

Cool Season Lawns

Do This!

Mowing:

Mow at a 2.5" to 3" height from the first to the last mowing of the season for Kentucky bluegrass and at a 3 to 3.5" height for tall fescue. A taller height shades the crown (growing point), reduces weeds, and promotes root growth.

Mow often so no more than one-third of the grass blade is removed during a mowing.

Return grass clippings to the lawn to decompose to improve soil and contribute nutrients.

Use a sharp mower blade to avoid shredding grass.

Irrigation/Watering:

Leave automatic irrigation systems turned off. Only turn them on to water when soil is beginning to dry and turfgrass is showing signs of needing moisture (dark blue-green cast, footprints remaining in turf).

Water long enough to moisten soil 4" to 6" deep.

Water at a slow enough rate so water soaks into soil and does not run off of the lawn.

Water early, about 4 am to 8 am, as it is more efficient (less wind and heat); and less conducive to disease.

Fertilization:

Use a fertilizer with about 50% slow release or water insoluble nitrogen (N) sources for late spring, summer and very early fall fertilization.

Use phosphorous (P) free fertilizer (i.e. 21-0-5) unless a soil test indicates P is needed. Have a soil test taken to determine the need for P and potassium (K).

Fertilize in September. This is the most important application of the season.

Wait to fertilize in spring until after soil temperatures warm, grass slows growth and starts to lose color. As a rule, sometime in May in eastern Nebraska.

Fertilize again when lawns begin to slow growth or green color begins lightens.

On young lawns, an application may be needed in early to mid-October. If so, only use a fertilizer with water soluble or fast release N sources.

On older, established lawns, only two fertilizations are usually needed per season.

Don't Do This!

Mowing:

Don't mow too low. Repeated low mowing may limit the root system and increase weeds.

Don't mow turfgrass lower in spring and fall.

Don't let turfgrass grow so tall so that more than one-third of a grass blade is removed while mowing. This is considered scalping and stresses turf.

Don't catch and remove clippings from lawns.

Don't use a dull mower blade. Shredded grass tips turn whitish-gray and water loss can be increased.

Irrigation/Watering:

Don't turn automatic irrigation systems on and leave them on all season. Lawns will be incorrectly watered.

Avoid shallow irrigation. Don't water for very brief periods so only the upper 2 to 3 inches of soil is moistened at each irrigation.

Don't allow water to run off the lawn.

Don't water at midday or in the evening. Water will be lost to evaporation from wind and heat; and diseases will be encouraged by moisture remaining on grass blades for longer periods.

Fertilization:

Don't use fertilizer containing phosphorous (P) unless a soil test shows the need for P. Excess P can enter surface water and impair water quality.

Don't fertilize too early in spring when soils are cold and turfgrass is already actively growing.

Don't overlook fertilizing in September. This is when turfgrass is recovering from summer stress and increasing turf density with root, rhizome and stolon growth.

Don't fertilize after late October as nitrogen may not be taken up by plants since turfgrass growth is slowing and soil temperatures are cooling. Nitrogen may then leach out of soil or remain in soil to promote too early spring growth.

Do This!

Core Aeration:

Aerate or plug lawns at least once every three years or more often to relieve soil compaction, promote root growth, and slow thatch accumulation.

Aerate in April or September when soil is moist. Soil should not be too wet or too dry.

Ideally, plugs removed should be 2 to 3 inches long. If not, consider annual aeration until they are.

Leave plugs on the lawn to break down and return soil.

Power Raking:

Check for and measure true thatch to determine if power raking is needed. True thatch is a reddish brown mat of dead roots and rhizomes. It is found between the grass and soil. It cannot be seen from the surface. A plug or wedge of turf needs to be removed to see thatch. Grass clippings are not part of thatch.

Power rake if true thatch exceeds one-half inch. Less than one-half inch is beneficial as it insulates the growing point from traffic and weather extremes.

Power rake in April or September when soil is not too wet or too dry. There should be at least 30 good growing days after power raking for the lawn to recover from the stress of power raking.

Rake and remove plant debris that is brought up from the lawn by power raking.

Overseeding Thin or Bare Areas:

Buy quality seed from a reputable retailer.

Overseed late August to early September. This is the ideal time for cool season turfgrasses. Dormant seeding (late November into March) is the second choice and spring (April) is the third choice.

Prepare soil to promote seed to soil contact. Power rake if true thatch is present; then core aerate by making at least four passes perpendicular to one another.

Overseed at the recommended rate. See "Establishing Lawns From Seed" at <https://go.unl.edu/ikwt>

Keep soil moist to promote germination and seedling growth.

Don't Do This!

Core Aeration:

Don't overlook core aeration. It is an important turf and soil management practice.

Don't aerate during periods of stress or when soil is too wet or too dry.

Use a machine that removes plugs; not one that only punches holes in the soil as this creates compaction.

Do not rake and removed plugs after aeration.

Power Raking:

Don't power rake unless true thatch exceeds one-half inch. This practice is stressful and brings weed seeds to the surface.

Don't power rake during periods of turf stress or when soil is too dry or too wet.

Don't use power raking in place of core aeration.

Overseeding Thin or Bare Areas:

Don't buy cheap seed. Germination rates may be low and troublesome weeds can be introduced.

Don't broadcast or drill seed without first doing soil preparation.

Don't use preemergence herbicides prior to overseeding unless the product is labeled for new seedings.

Don't seed at too high or too low of a rate.

IAWN Resources



Managing Turf and Landscape Weeds
<https://go.unl.edu/96t5>



Selecting a Professional Lawn and
Landscape Care Company
<https://go.unl.edu/p3x9>



Nebraska Turfgrass Science Website:
<https://turf.unl.edu/>