

BEGIN LAWN FERTILIZATION IN MAY

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Spring is the start of lawn fertilization, but don't begin too early if you fertilize your own lawn. May is the best month to start fertilizing Kentucky bluegrass and tall fescue.

Why wait until May when many homeowners and lawn care services begin in April? From late March into early May, turfgrass breaks dormancy and growth takes off. Nitrogen fertilization at this time stimulates grass to grow even faster, making it difficult to keep up with mowing.

If more than one-third of the grass blade is removed during mowing turf is scalped. Research shows scalping increases growth rate leading to the need for increased mowing frequency. This is referred to as compensatory growth and is a sign of stress with roots negatively affected. Scalping also opens lawns up to weed growth.

When turfgrass has good green color and is growing rapidly, nitrogen is not needed. Hence, for do-it-yourselfers, nitrogen fertilization is recommended to begin in May.

May is when soils warm to a level that increases soil microbe activity. Microbes then use soil nitrogen, taking it away from turfgrass so lawn color declines and growth rate slows. This period from late spring to early summer is when nitrogen fertilization is best.

Many homeowners apply combination fertilizer and herbicide products. In spring, preemergence (PREs) herbicides are often targeted at crabgrass control. Crabgrass is a warm season annual. The majority of seed germination begins when soil temperatures reach 60 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

Monitor soil temperatures at a two inch depth with a soil thermometer. If soil temperatures are consistently remaining at about 55 degrees F. in April, apply a stand-alone PRE product. If soil temperatures are slower to warm, a combination product can be used in May.

When fertilizing, it is recommended to use a fertilizer with about 50 percent slow-release nitrogen. These can be difficult to find. Slow release nitrogen sources are listed as water insoluble on the fertilizer bag. Fast release nitrogen sources are listed as water soluble or quick release.

Quick release fertilizers promote rapid green up, but the effect won't last. They also increase the risk of scalping when mowing. The effect of quick release fertilizer lasts about three to six weeks. Fertilizers with half quick and half slow release nitrogen promote quick green up but also last six to ten weeks.

For established lawns, phosphorous and potassium are rarely deficient. Because phosphorous is a major nutrient leading to impaired surface water, avoid applying phosphorous unless a soil test indicates it is needed. The second number listed on fertilizer bags represents phosphorous.

After fertilizing, always sweep granules off impervious surfaces like pavement and place them on the lawn.

Source: University of Nebraska-Lincoln TurfInfo 6.29.17.