

It's Too Early for Lawn Work!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I often tell people to ignore the calendar for many lawn and garden activities, but this is one case where I think it's crucial to pay attention to the calendar. I don't care what the thermometer says the temperature is, it is simply too early for most lawn activities! Just because temperatures are running well above normal now, doesn't mean that they will be come March 1 or even March 15th. So you just need to hold your horses a little bit and keep in mind that it is still just the middle of February!

Yes, we've had some warm days. But the soil temperature is what's crucial and the two inch soil temperature is still hovering below 40 degrees. We're a long time from crabgrass germination yet so don't be in a hurry. Even grass seed that may have been sown late, or dormant seeded, isn't going to germinate very fast as these temperatures. It just needs a few more weeks before we get started.

The other thing to keep in mind is what kind of grass do you have. If you have a cool season grass, this will include tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass, then yes, March is when that grass starts to get growing. But if you have a warm season grass, including buffalograss, zoysia or Bermudagrass, then just set your calendar back about another six weeks.

There will be some grass growth, of established turf, during warm periods like we are seeing now. The roots of these cool season grasses are slowly getting active already and will take up both moisture and nutrients from the soil. But the real spring growth spurt isn't going to start for about another month, basically mid-March. This is a good thing because new grass shoots can be nipped by cold weather. In 2007 we saw abnormally warm weather through the month of March (9 degrees above normal!) which got everything growing way too early. So when we all woke up Eastern morning, April 7th, with a low of 20 degrees. There were a lot of nice green lawns that got frosted badly! The lawns came out of the damage okay, but you don't want to do anything to get lawns growing too fast, too early!

Once we get into March you can go ahead and start spot treating broadleaf weeds that may have not been treated last fall. If you find that you have a lot of broadleaf weeds you may need to do a lawn wide treatment. If you treated for broadleaf weeds last fall and still have a lot of weeds, you probably treated too early. Just a reminder not to apply any herbicide if you want to plant any grass seed this spring to prevent the risk of injury to young grass seedlings.

Even though commercial firms are often applying crabgrass preventers in March, homeowners need to probably avoid doing this. If you are using one of the newer crabgrass preventers that contain prodiamine or dithiopyr you can probably apply them the last week of March. Otherwise, wait until the first half of April, typically when the redbuds are in full bloom. If you need to do some re-seeding or overseeding, then wait until after about March 25th to seed, mainly because of weather concerns. If you want to core aerate or dethatch, do that about mid to late March but before you apply a crabgrass preventer.

If you have to do something in the next few weeks, work on picking up branches that have fallen out of trees or just general clean up. But under no circumstances do you want to be out there with your lawn mower mowing your lawn short to get rid of the winter frozen grass. There'll be enough time for that, later!