

## **Time to Fertilize Lawns, But Not for Weed Control**

### **AGRI-VIEWS**

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

If, like most of us, you have a cool season lawn, meaning tall fescue or bluegrass, then how good your lawn looks next spring depends on the care that you give it during September and October. In the fall, the weather is cooling down. The temperatures are falling back into the range that these cool season grasses really enjoy. By fertilizing now you are stimulating your lawn to thicken up, develop larger crowns and more extensive root systems. The result will be a lawn that greens up quicker next spring looking greener and lusher.

Last week's rains and the cooler weather that has arrived is to the likings of lawn grasses. You want to stimulate those lawn grasses to grow and the key is generally nitrogen. Nitrogen is the fertilizer element that stimulates leaf growth and gives that nice green color. You want to fertilize with a high nitrogen fertilizer. All bags of fertilizer will show you, either in a formula like 28-3-3, or on a descriptive panel on the back of the bag, what it contains. Nitrogen is the first number in the series of three numbers or it's generally going to be the first number listed on the back panel.

If, from a soil test, you know that you have a low phosphorus soil, or you are in a new neighborhood in town and past grass plantings come up and then just sit there, then you also need a high phosphorus fertilizer. Phosphorus is the second number of the three or usually the second number on the table. You can look for fertilizers like 11-52-0, 18-46-0 or 16-20-0. If you find one of those then apply about 4 pounds per 1,000 square feet. Look for a lawn starter fertilizer and use that at the recommended rate or just use something like a 12-12-12 or 13-13-13 at ten pounds per 1,000 square feet. If you are thinking about core aerating, do that before applying the first fertilization, especially if you need to raise phosphorus levels.

What you do NOT want to be applying right now is anything labeled as a weed and feed. These products contain broadleaf weed killers. These are the weeds like dandelions that will be blooming early next spring. Most of these weeds will be germinating later this month or in early October. If you apply a weed and feed now, it will do nothing to control those weeds that emerge later. For now, just use a high nitrogen fertilizer.

Starting in mid October you want to consider a second application of fertilizer. What you want to focus on at this time is nitrogen only. At that time the weed and feed products are the perfect choice to use. Most of these are a high nitrogen fertilizer product with the broadleaf weed killer. Most of those spring blooming weeds will have germinated by mid October so you can do a good job of controlling them at that time and get that second application of nitrogen applied. If you apply both of these fertilizations this fall there is really no need to apply any fertilizer in the spring unless it's the only way you can apply your crabgrass preventer.

If you seeded a new lawn or overseeded an existing lawn you don't want to use any weed killers until you have mowed it three times. The weed killers can damage young grass seedlings. You want to remember to continue to mow bluegrass 2.5 to 3 inches tall and tall fescue 3 to 3.5 inches tall. This is for new lawns and existing lawns right up to, and including, the last mowing before winter. By the way, the third number on the fertilizer analysis is potassium. We rarely talk about it because our soils are naturally high in potassium and rarely deficient.

So to have a great looking lawn next spring, fertilize now, mow tall, fertilize again in mid to late October, mow tall, treat for weeds in late October, and mow tall! Follow those simple steps for a great looking spring lawn!