

Spring Lawn Tasks

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Spring is officially here! We've had some very nice rains and slowly the weather and the soil are warming up. Lawns are greening up and will be exploding in growth before very much longer, assuming you have a cool season lawn like fescue or bluegrass. Which means that there are plenty of tasks to tend to in the days ahead.

Many homeowners want to cut the grass low first thing in the spring to get all of that old dead grass cleared off. You can do this but don't get carried to extremes. When I say low I mean about one half inch lower than normal. For bluegrass and tall fescue that means no lower than 2½ inches. Mowing it lower will cause it to green up sooner but it also exposes the crowns of the grass plants to cold weather if we have another cold snap. Remember, we had some chilly weather in early April a year ago and could still see temperatures into the teens in early April. Cutting real low, or scalping, also exposes more bare soil and with rain and bare soil it's an invitation to get some weed seed germinating.

Ideally, cool season lawns are fertilized once or twice in the fall and broadleaf weed killers applied in late October or early November. If you didn't get your lawn fertilized last fall get it done soon. Same thing with broadleaf weed control. Many of those early season weeds are already blooming and while you can control them now, they aren't quite as easy to kill and many will likely go ahead and produce seed. If you walk through your lawn and you don't find any weeds or just scattered weeds, then don't spray or just spot spray the few weeds you have.

Speaking of weeds, it's about time to apply crabgrass preventer products. These are preventers not killers so you need to apply them before the crabgrass or foxtail seed sprouts and starts growing. We normally recommend mid April for this but part of that depends on which herbicide you are using. Check the label of your crabgrass product. If it says pendimethalin or Team, then definitely shoot for mid April and then plan on making a second application as directed by the label. If you have one of the newer generation of preventers; dithiopyr or prodiamine then one treatment is probably enough. Barricade (prodiamine) can be applied anytime now. Dimension (dithiopyr) has added flexibility that if time gets away from you it can control seedling (2 to 3 leaves) crabgrass. But preferably don't let that happen. Remember all of these products need rainfall or irrigation to activate.

Lastly, if you need to do some re-seeding or over-seeding get that done as quickly as possible as well. Once we get into early June and summer heat starts hitting the area these cool season grasses really want to go semi-dormant and rest. Therefore we need to get those new grass plants germinated and growing just as quickly as possible so they can develop enough of a crown system to survive the summer. If possible, delaying seeding until late August or early September may be preferable. If you are seeding, avoid any crabgrass preventer or even broadleaf weed killer. Crabgrass preventers, with a few exceptions, don't know the difference between fescue and crabgrass. Broadleaf weed killers can damage young seedlings even a few weeks after treatment.

I can understand the desire to have a lush green lawn as early in the year as possible. But take your time and let the grass get going on it's own schedule. There'll be plenty of mowing to do before autumn arrives in six months!