

Natural lawn

Secrets to a Green and Natural Lawn For You and Your Clients.

We have special weather and soil conditions here in the Pacific Northwest. We have very dry summers, wet winters, and acidic soil. Unfortunately, lawn grasses prefer wet summers, dry winters and neutral soils. Even more important, we have poor soils in the Pacific Northwest. This is because just a few thousand years ago there was a mile high ice glacier covering the Puget Sound area which compacted our soils and left nothing but rock and clay. Lawns don't grow well in compacted clay. So what to do?

Many of the ways we traditionally maintain lawns are costly and have dangerous impacts on the environment and on our children's health. When homeowners use products like Weed-and-Feed, they need to water a lot more in the summer. The summer rate for water is a lot more expensive and can be several hundred dollars more per month. The herbicide in Weed-and-Feed (2,4-D) can easily track into the house by children and pets. Once in the house, everyone in the family is breathing in particles of 2,4-D, which is a known cause of cancer—especially in small children and pets. If rain washes 2,4-D off our lawns into our lakes, rivers, streams and Puget Sound, it becomes a toxin for a very long time.

There is a technique called Natural Lawn Care that helps create a lawn that will be successful in the Northwest. There are six easy steps to making a healthy lawn.



1. Let the grass grow taller – 2 inches high. It is healthier that way.

- Set the mowing heights up to about 2 inches. This develops deeper roots and crowds out weeds.
- Remove only one-third of the grass length at each

mowing. Try to mow weekly in spring. Cutting too much or down to the level of the white stem, stresses the grass.

- Leave the clippings on the lawn. This provides ¼ of your lawn's fertilizer needs. It helps lawns grow greener. Be sure to keep the blades sharp. A push mower works best and creates the best looking lawn of all.
- Consider using a "mulching mower" which chops the clippings very finely and blows them down into the lawn so they disappear and won't be tracked into the house. This also cuts down on the costs of raking or hauling and dumping. This savings can pay for the extra mowing to keep the grass a little taller.



Natural Lawn Care helps to create a lawn that will be successful in the Northwest

2. For best results, fertilize in early May or end of September with a slow release organic fertilizer.

•Synthetic or chemical quick-release fertilizers will release their fertilizer the minute they get wet. So they have to be applied often. This creates very short roots that dry out quickly and become so thick that they choke themselves to death. This is called "thatch" and can be a major problem.

•A slow release fertilizer releases over six months, going down deeper into the soil and helping the grass to grow longer roots. Longer roots don't dry out quickly and make a more sustainable plant.

- It is important to apply lawn lime (calcium) in the spring or fall to keep the soil from getting too acidic for grass to grow. Follow the directions on the package.

3. Water deeply but only once a week.

- Grasses do better when the whole root zone is wetted and then left to dry out. Too much water will rot the roots, particularly in the summer.
- If there is so much thatch that water won't penetrate the lawn, then aerate the soil with an aerating machine.
- A good practice is to water the lawn one inch per week during July and August. This way, water soaks deep into the soil. When the top of the soil dries out for a week, the roots will seek the water and grow longer and deeper. Deep roots are always in the damp area deep in the soil. The slow release fertilizer that gets pulled down with deep watering will reward the roots that grow more deeply. The result is a great looking green lawn that needs less water.
- Consider letting the lawn go golden in the summer. Lawns naturally go to a dormant stage and easily turn green again when the rain returns. This saves hundreds of dollars in water costs. It is still a good idea to water deeply just once a month to avoid too much stress.



4. Improve poor lawns with aeration and over-seeding or consider rehabilitating the soil and starting over.

•First, check to see how deep your roots are. Take a shovel and make two cuts just an inch apart. Pull up the grass sample. Are the

roots short and dense (1-2 inches)? Is the sample stiff and hard, or is it loose and open, falling apart easily, with long, dangling roots? If it is short and stiff, it is thatch. If it is really bad, you will need to rent a de-thatching machine.

- You can also aerate compacted and thatched lawn in the spring or fall to improve root development. Use a rented power aerator for best results. The soil should be moist but not wet. Making two or more passes gives better results. Rake or mow to break up the little cores. Aerators that penetrate to 2 inches are okay, but those that penetrate 6-8 inches are better.
- Spread new seed over the area, using a perennial rye and fine fescue grass seed mix designed for Pacific Northwest conditions. Ask your retail store for this grass mix.



Pesticides (herbicides), which kill plants, are not good for the environment or for public health.

- April/May or September are the best times to aerate and over-seed.
- For best results, spread ½ inch of fine compost over the seeds and rake it smooth and evenly.

5. Think twice before using “weed and feed” or other pesticides.

- Pesticides (herbicides), which kill plants, are not good for the environment or for public health. Some herbicides kill the life in the soil which can then kill the lawn itself over several years.
- Weeds are a sign of poor, compacted soils, low in calcium.
- If you have a well aerated lawn with deep roots and 2-inch heights, this will crowd out many weeds.
- Providing annual lime (calcium) to the soil will also discourage many weeds.
- Don’t cover your entire lawn with weed and feed just to kill a few weeds. Remove problem weeds by hand in the

spring and fall, before they go to flower. Long handled weed pullers are easy to use and work better in wet or damp soils.

- If you use an herbicide, use a spot spray technique—only on the weed, not on the grass. Identify the weed to make sure you are using the correct product.
- Read the label carefully before using any pesticide—including weed and feed.
- Be sure to follow all label warnings, wear proper clothing, and keep children and pets off the lawn for at least as long as the label describes.



•Call the Hazards Line at 206-296-4692 for information on safe disposal of leftover pesticides.

•Tip: if you have a LOT of weeds, you probably have very poor soils. It might be better to replace the lawn. Spread glyphosate (Roundup) once to kill all the weeds. Add two inches of compost and plow it in to a depth of 6-8 inches. Rake the soil level, roll with a landscape roller, water to settle and rake again. Seed with northwest lawn seed. For more information, contact WSU Cooperative Extension.

6. Consider reducing the size of your lawn, especially on steep slopes, shady areas under trees, or near streams and lakes.

- Grass grows best on loose soil that does not have standing water.
- Steep slopes are hard and expensive to water and mow.
- Shade, leaves and needles from trees will smother grass and create highly acidic soils. Turn these difficult areas into garden beds.
- Smaller lawns require less maintenance and cost less.

For more information, call 206-633-0224 or email: gardenhotline@seattletilth.org. To find out about less-toxic ways to manage pests, visit www.govlink.org/hazwaste/house

This guide was developed and produced by King County Water and Land Resources Division, Seattle Public Utilities, and the Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County.