

GARDEN DEVA'S ORGANIC LAWN CARE GUIDE



Well looked after, healthy lawns can be a major asset to a garden, providing cooling, reducing pollution and sinking carbon. Hot summer winds are cooled by passing over the lawn before entering the house creating a natural and free air conditioner. 100m² of lawn provides the same cooling effect in summer as running 4 air conditioners.

It IS possible to have an eco-friendly lawn. We don't need a huge area -that's what parks are for - but a small, sustainably grown patch actually doesn't use huge amounts of water.

We believe that organically grown lawns are less work than those which have been treated chemically. They tend to have stronger root systems, less pests and diseases and require less water. They also tend to need less mowing because the growth, though strong and sustained; is slower compared with the unnaturally fast rate of their chemical cousins. You can smile because using a sensible and moderate fertiliser regime and natural pest control, you will not be polluting our waterways and your children and pets will not be rolling around on your lawn absorbing chemicals.

JANUARY

Apply seaweed liquid to lawn for a boost and to reduce heat stress. Hose on packs are convenient and refillable. There are now many seaweed products on the market:

- Try: *No Frills Seaweed tonic, Eco C Weed, Maxi Crop Seaweed Fertiliser or Seasol.*
- Raise mower height to 40 - 50mm to avoid scalping turf roots in summer. The longer grass acts like a mulch, helping to shade its own roots and retain soil moisture. The result is a more dry tolerant turf. If possible, leave clippings on the lawn and rake over finely to provide both organic matter and a light mulch cover for roots.

MARCH

- Aerate your lawn with a pitchfork or a coring machine. Obviously avoid doing this if you have sub surface drip irrigation. Whatever your retic system, be mindful of the position of your polypipe.
- After aerating and watering, feed lawn with an organic slow release fertiliser such as *Eco Growth's Eco Prime Emerald Lawn Fertiliser* (brilliant stuff – we could see the difference in our lawn in 3 days) or rake over 20-30mm of soil conditioner or screened worm casts.
- Be alert for army worm – see LAWN PROBLEMS below. Check for weeds. Deal with them quickly before they seed.
- If you have a lawn contractor, ensure he or she washes down their mower before they come to your place. Weed seeds are often transported into gardens this way. If they refuse to do it, change contractors.

MAY

- Give your lawn a treat and apply a seaweed liquid to encourage health, growth and microbial action .
- Lower the mower height to 20 -30mm. This will allow more sun to penetrate and warm the soil as the days become cooler. It will also reduce fungal attacks and waterlogging. Keep mower blades sharpened. This avoids ragged edges on the

grass blades which increases evaporation and makes the grass more susceptible to disease.

AUGUST

- Invest in a mulcher/mower or remove the catcher on your mower to allow those nutrients to return to the soil, adding valuable organic matter and 'mulching' your lawn. Only do this when the safety flap is fully lowered and mow from the perimeter from the centre to make sure all clipping stay on the lawn area. Rake over if necessary to even out any clumps.
- Contrary to popular belief, allowing clippings to decompose on your lawn does not cause a build-up of thatch (a layer on top of the soil that blocks water and nutrients from reaching the grass's roots). Thatch is more likely caused by over-fertilising.

SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER

- Aerate lawn again and if your soil is water repellent, like most of Perth - fork in *Bailey's Grosorb* (granular) or, even better use *Eco Hydrate* or *Eco Wet* (liquid). Water in well. Check out our website article on wetting agents.
- Feed lawn again. (see March entry) Now you've aerated and applied one of the above wetting agents, the nutrients and water will penetrate through to the roots where it's needed.

DECEMBER

- Aerate and feed lawn again. Aerating stops soil compaction and allows nutrients, wetting agent and water to penetrate to the roots. If using a pitchfork, push it into the ground, and wiggle back and forward at 10 – 15 cm intervals until entire lawn is aerated. For large lawns, hire a coring machine or outsource to a lawn contractor.

WATERING YOUR LAWN

Unless you irrigate your garden with bore water, Perth gardeners are restricted to twice weekly watering only, with no reticulation allowed from either mains or bores from 1 June to 31 August. In our dry climate, every drop is precious, so make sure sprinklers are working well penetrating your soil evenly.

With new lawns, ensure they are prepared properly with clay amendments and soil conditioner, and not just laying on top of sand and a sprinkling of Dynamic Lifter as some naughty contractors are wont to do!

LAYING A NEW LAWN

Thorough soil preparation is essential for a healthy lawn. The best time in Perth to lay a lawn is in autumn or spring.

1. Ensure all weeds are removed before preparing soil.
2. Mix 50mm of Lawn Concentrate from Greenlife Soil Co. into 100mm of existing soil. www.greenlifesoil.com.au (OR use screened compost/soil conditioner and add your own clay amendment). Recycled worm casting filled potting mix is also excellent.

3. Level lawn using a lawn leveller (hire), ensuring lawn sits a little higher than paths or edges. Turf is about 25mm thick.
4. Lay the turf along edges first to avoid the perimeter drying out.
5. Firmly press the turf edges together to join and knit. Stagger your joins rather than lining piece lengths up together.
6. Water in well and treat with seaweed liquid to get your lawn off to a flying start.
7. Water every day for a week. (NB you will need permission from the Water Corporation to do this.)
8. Wait until roots have established first before mowing for the first time. To check, simply pull up a bit of grass and if it lifts off easily, it's too soon. Give it a chance to bond with its neighbouring roll.

The first mowing should be at the longest setting to encourage new growth.

COMMON LAWN PROBLEMS and their solutions.

Dollar spot – is a fungus which infects lawns, particularly couch grass, and mostly in autumn and spring. It relishes moist, warm days and cool nights. Individual dollar sized straw coloured spots can join together to destroy large patches of lawn. NB small dog urine damage can look suspiciously similar!

Dollar spot usually occurs in non-wetting soils when watering is too shallow and frequent, encouraging the lawn surface to stay wet and the soil to remain dry. Proper soil preparation and use of wetting agents prevents this.



Dollar spot damage is usually more severe if there is a deficiency of nitrogen. Disease fungi are spread from one area to another by water, wind, mowers, other equipment or shoes. Healthy organically cared for lawns are rarely affected by this disease.



Fairy Ring – sounds like a children's garden but is actually another fungal disease which creates large round patches in the lawn, with the edge of these patches ringed by mushrooms or a bright green colour. The inner section of the circle is usually a different, duller colour or contains damaged turf.

Fairy Rings will be most noticeable in spring and autumn.

Again, if you follow the advice in this article, it is unlikely you will ever experience this problem. As with any fungal problem in the garden, ensure that you water in the morning not at night, as water on any leaf surface is an ideal breeding ground for any fungus.

Army worm – is a type of caterpillar which is active in spring and autumn. If you start to notice brown or straw like patches through your lawn or the leaves on your runners simply disappear, this could indicate army worm. These pests move in a front, leaving lawn bare behind them. Safe organic control - Wet towels or moist hessian sacks trap them and *Yates Nature's Way Caterpillar Killer* (a bacterial controls for caterpillars) will kill them. Put wet towels out at night where dead turf meets undamaged turf and spray a small section of unharmed grass. Repeat if necessary. Alternatively, use Eco Growth's *Eco Grub 3 in 1 for Lawns and*



Gardens - an organic insecticide with essential oils, a fertiliser and wetting agent all rolled into one.

African black beetle – these grubs feed from September to May and eat the lawn roots, causing the grass to die in patches for no apparent reason. Sometimes the problem is not actually black beetle but simply non wetting soil, or 'dry patch'. A good way to check if you have this pest is if the dead grass comes away easily when you pull it up. Another indicator



you may have a problem is the appearance of birds on your lawn. The adult African Black beetle is 10-13mm long and shiny and black. It is their babies, the larvae (grub) which do the most damage.

These pesky grubs thrive in a moist environment. It is good practice to allow your lawn to dry out a little (not completely) between watering.

Aerating your lawn using a garden fork will also encourage stronger and less palatable roots for lawn beetle. Additionally, encourage birds who love to eat your lawn and garden pests by planting habitat trees and supplying fresh water via birdbaths.

Safe organic control – Multicrop's *Eco Grub 3 in 1 for Lawns and Gardens* or again, Yates *Nature's Way Caterpillar Killer*.

Whichever product you choose to use, apply to the lawn and wait for the bugs to die. It usually takes 3-4 days.

Please note: There are highly toxic chemical insecticides specific to lawn beetle which are still on the market and unfortunately are still widely recommended. These are very poisonous and not only may be lethal to birds and other creatures eating the sprayed pest but are also commonly absorbed by pets and children through the feet and skin.

Recently we heard from a local gardener who, after using one of these products, was sick in bed for 2 weeks despite wearing protective gear when spraying.

Contrary to popular belief, Australia has some of the most lax chemical regulations in the world.

Thatch build up – thatch is a layer of vegetative and dead material which accumulates as lawn grows. Please do not confuse this with leaving clippings to mulch your lawn, which contributes to the soil and, if raked over and not left in huge clumps, will prevent thatch. Thatch only becomes a problem if it is more than 13mm thick. Commercial contractors remove thatch by using a verti-mower, which has blades set vertically to cut into the grass and soil. This process may be done every 2-3 years if required.

LAWN VARIETIES FOR PERTH GARDENS

BUFFALO – Soft leafed buffalos are the most popular lawns installed in Perth and for good reason. They are good for high traffic areas (ie sport, dogs, kids), they are pretty shade tolerant (between 50-70%) and repair well. Mow once every week in hot weather, except if you have the Matilda variety, which needs considerably less mowing.

VARIETIES

Sir Walter – very hardy, good self-repair ability, salt tolerant (pools and coastal), keeps even colour all year, low allergy.

Matilda: semi-dwarf, slow growth, low allergy, salt tolerant, durable. Mow: every 2-3 weeks.

Palmetto – good shade tolerance (up to 60%), tough, best winter colour buffalo grass, less allergenic than other buffalos due to less seed heads. Low thatch. Least invasive buffalo.

Sapphire – very good shade tolerance, finer leaf, fast growing, mat habit crowds out weeds and durable. Up to 70% shade tolerant.

ZOYSIA - Zoysia is a beautiful native grass. It is a fine grass, like couch but not invasive. Zoysia's deep root system makes it very drought tolerant and it requires much less mowing than most buffalo (ie every 3-4 weeks). You can also choose not to mow it! Unmown Zoysia looks sculptural as it has a natural mounding habit – very Zen! Another major benefit is its resistance to lawn grubs.



VARIETIES

Empire – low wear areas – ie not for playing cricket on or for large dogs, good in sandy soils and slopes, needs only 2 fertiliser applications a year as it is slower growing than other grass. 30-50% shade.

Empress – small and fine leafed, very soft to touch, good shade tolerance, reasonably hard wearing

Nara – fine texture, coast tolerant, 3 times faster growing and quicker to establish than other zoysia, requires less garden edging than buffalo, couch and kikuya. Better green colour in winter than couch and other zoysias. Vigorous and non thatchy. Some shade ok.

Other turf varieties suitable for Perth's hot climate include the ever durable **kikuya** and **couch**, however these varieties – even the cultivars – can often still be invasive, particularly when they are left a little neglected. Once you have couch running rampantly through your garden beds, you will be cursing forever more! A better behaved couch is the bluish green QLD Blue which is coastal tolerant and hard wearing if you must have it.

A NOTE ON SHADE

Shade tolerance of turf varies depends on the both the variety and the usage. Heavy use means it is less shade tolerant because the flattened leaf blades receive less light. This is similar to how a shade plant usually has large leaves to capture as much light as possible and an arid native plant has thin leaves to reduce the surface area. Nature is smart!

A classic problem for home gardeners is the combination of a neighbouring fence with the low angle of the winter sun which completely shades portions of lawn in winter. Even highly shade tolerant lawn varieties may struggle with this. Some options are: reduce a portion of your lawn and create a shade tolerant garden bed instead. Oversow with dichondra which will blend beautifully into your lawn and is winter dominant. It is also able to be mown over.

NB - If you employ a lawn contractor, please feel free to copy this article for their use.

Happy lawn growing!

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