

## Keeping Your Lawn Healthy through the Summer



*Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Proper care will help keep your lawn healthy through the summer.*

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**A**t this time of year as we see damage to our lawns, such as yellowing blades or brown patches, we assume we have a pest infestation or a fungal disease. That may not be the case.

Our summer weather is conducive to the development of lawn diseases. But the way we maintain our lawns can also be a major contributor to lawn problems. When grasses are properly watered, mowed, and fertilized, they are less likely to be severely damaged by disease.

Let's look at some of the cultural practices that will increase our lawn's disease tolerance.

**MOWING** - Mowing at the proper height and interval, and keeping mower blades sharp, will promote a healthy lawn. 'Bitter Blue' and 'Raleigh' types of St. Augustine should be mowed at a height of 3-4 inches whereas 'Seville' and other semi-dwarf types of St. Augustine can be mowed a little lower, down to 2 or 2 ½ inches. Centipede grass can be mowed to 1 ½ or 2 inches, though in areas where there is shade or in times of drought stress, it is better to mow it no lower than 2 or 2 ½ inches. Where you have a mixture of St. Augustine and centipede, it is probably best to mow no lower than 2 ½ or 3 inches, depending on the type of St. Augustine you have. Mowing frequency should insure that no more than one-third of the blade is removed at each mowing.

**IRRIGATION** – Too much water, rain, high humidity, and heavy dew keep the grass moist for longer periods and more susceptible to disease. We can't control the natural moisture conditions, but we can control the time and manner of irrigation. Water only when the turf begins to show signs of wilt and only in the early morning hours. The amount of water depends on the soil type, but it should be sufficient to wet, not saturate, the root zone (8-10 inches) of the turf. This usually requires about ½ to ¾ inches of water. More frequent and less deep

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watering may be required for newly planted lawns.

**FERTILIZATION** – Generally, moderate fertilization with a product containing slow-release nitrogen is best. For St. Augustine grasses, fertilization should be made two weeks or more after the grass has turned green and begun to grow in the spring. If the fertilizer contains at least half of its nitrogen in a slow-release form, it can be distributed at the rate of one pound of actual nitrogen per 1000 square feet of lawn. That would equate to 6.5 pounds of 15-0-15 per 1000 square. Cut this rate in half if at least half of the nitrogen (7.5%) is not in a slow-release form.

Although phosphorus, the middle number in the fertilizer analysis is not normally in short supply in our soils if phosphorus-containing fertilizers have been used in the past, it is probably a good idea to include some phosphorus in the initial fertilization for new lawns. For example, use 6.25 pounds of 16-4-8 per 1000 square feet. Of course, the best way to see exactly what your lawn needs is to have a soil test done. You may pick up soil test mailing kits from the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County at 615 Paul Russell Road.

Centipedegrass is a low maintenance grass and does not tolerate over-fertilization. Generally, a 15-0-15 fertilizer with slow-release nitrogen should be distributed at the same rates and times listed above. A second fertilization may be made in early September for St. Augustine. A winterizing fertilizer such as 5-0-15 may be used for that late summer fertilization.

Good cultural practices will not guarantee a disease-free lawn, but it will insure a healthy lawn equipped to resist diseases. If you notice suspicious areas in your lawn, check with your nursery professional or agricultural extension agent to identify the problem prior to using fertilizers or pesticides. Your nursery professional or extension agent will help you develop a treatment program.

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