Lawns Will Awaken Slowly This Spring

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: It has been a cold winter, and lawns will awaken slowly this spring.

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It has been a cold winter, and spring seems to be getting off to a slow start too. So, don’t be in a hurry to green your lawn up. Lawns will awaken slowly this spring.

Temperature is the limiting factor at this point. We need a number of warm days and mild nights for soil temperatures to rise and for lawngrases to begin strong growth. Trying to speed things up with fertilizer, water, or weedkillers won’t help. In fact, you can harm your lawn by doing too much too early. Be patient.

St. Augustine grass lawns usually green up faster than do our centipede lawns. But, because of the extremely cold winter, expect to see some damage even in St. Augustine grass lawns this spring. If bare areas don’t fill in by May, then you may wish to plant some plugs into these damaged areas.

Be even more patient with centipede lawns. Especially where there’s some shade involved, centipede lawns often don’t really get going well until June, after the summer rains start.

So what should you be doing now in your lawn? Probably the first thing to do is to service your lawn mower. Sharpen the blade. Change the oil, and change oil and air filters. Lube all grease fittings. Set the mower to the proper height and then go out and mow those weeds that have popped up in your lawn. They are primarily winter annuals. Winter annuals are almost fully
mature now, so forget trying to kill them. You’re likely to do more damage to your lawn than to the weeds. Winter annuals will soon bloom, go to seed, and then die. If you have a lot of them, you may wish to apply a pre-emergence herbicide in October. But the best thing you can do right now is just keep them mowed.

Only if you usually have a lot of summer weeds, does applying a pre-emergence herbicide, such as atrazine, make sense now. Wait until temperatures rise a little more though, when the dogwoods and azaleas start blooming. And before you buy the atrazine product, make sure you read the label to see it’s safe to use in your situation. Atrazine can leach through sandy soils and reach our groundwater, so it shouldn’t be used on sandy or sandy loam soils, very common soils in our area.

Once your lawn greens up, probably in April this year, you may wish to apply some fertilizer. Unless you’ve had a soil test that shows your soil is low in phosphorus, use a no-phosphorus fertilizer such as 15-0-15. Phosphorus is a major pollutant of our lakes. Select a 15-0-15 fertilizer that has half its nitrogen (7.5%) in slow-release form. Apply this fertilizer at the rate of six pounds per thousand square feet of lawn. Irrigate with about one-quarter inch of water to wash the fertilizer into the root zone.

Except for watering in the fertilizer, don’t water your lawn unless we get into dry weather and the grass blades start rolling inward, giving the lawn a grayish color. If you do need to water, apply about one-half inch of water so that the root zone is wet well.

Sharpen your mower blade after about every eight hours of mowing. Dull mower blades leave ragged edges on the leaf blades.

As the weather warms, if you have shaded areas where the grass still doesn’t grow well, you may be better off planting some type of shade-tolerant groundcover in these areas. Or, you may just want to spread some mulch such as pine straw. If you’re determined to grow grass in these areas, try planting a few plugs of St. Augustine grass there before investing a lot of money. If the plugs don’t take and spread well, you definitely need to give up on growing grass there.

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