

Let's Talk Gardening

April 8, 2005

Tom Harris, Ph. D.

The Country Gardener

Almost Time to Fertilize the Yard

I sure hope you haven't added fertilizer to your yard yet. The grass—especially St. Augustine—is just now starting to grow well. About the only grass that is actively growing here now is “winter grass” or basically just weeds. If you have put down some fertilizer, what you fed were the weeds. Doesn't that make you feel good? Now you're gonna have a fine crop of WEEDS. Duh.

Your St. Augustine grass doesn't grow much until the soil warms up to about 70 degrees...and it's just now getting there. You will probably have mowed your St. Augustine grass two or three times before you can really say it's growing well. That will probably put you well into the month of April or maybe even May before you fertilize. Be sure to look for the words “slow-release” or something similar on the bag(s) of fertilizer you buy. That means that the effects of the fertilizer will last from several weeks to a few months—assuming of course that everything else in the yard is in good shape and that you put the right amount of water on the grass when it needs it.

If you have Zoysia or Bermuda grass, the requirements for fertilizer are about the same as for St. Augustine; that is, about 2 pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet per year...and the best way to do it is one pound in the fall and one pound in the spring. But if you didn't add any fertilizer last fall, don't put down the whole 2 pounds this spring. You'll burn up your grass. MORE IS NOT BETTER.

You need to remember that if the numbers on the bag are something like 20-5-10, only 20 percent of whatever is in that bag is nitrogen, about 5 percent is phosphorus, and 10 percent is potassium. What this means is that in a 40 pound bag, only about 8 pounds is actual nitrogen. THAT'S why you have to follow the directions on the bag when you get ready to fertilize the yard so that you know how much to put on depending on your type of fertilizer spreader.

Of course, the first thing you have to know is how many square feet you have in your yard. I don't know of any way to know this without measuring it. It doesn't have to be an accurate measurement—ball park is close enough. In case you've forgotten the geometry you had in high school, you figure square feet in squares and rectangles by multiplying the length times the width; for triangles, it's the same except that you divide the answer by half; for circles it's pi times the radius squared (3.14 or rounded off to 3, times half the distance across the circle times itself [10 x 10 = 100]). Remember? Huh? Do ya? Good.

If you have buffalo grass, it only needs about one pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet and it should be applied in May or early June. Buffalo grass is kinda finicky about fertilizer, so be really careful with it. Again, MORE IS NOT BETTER.

The recommended mowing heights for the grasses mentioned here are: St. Augustine, 2.5 inches in the sun and 3.5 inches in the shade; common Bermuda, 1 to 1.5 inches; Zoysia, 1 to 1.5 inches; and buffalo, 3-4 inches or none if you'd like a tufted-look. Try to mow the grass often enough that you don't cut off more than 1/3 of the blade height at any one mowing...in other words, don't let it get too high before you mow it. For St. Augustine, this sometimes means mowing about every 4-5 days—especially if you feed and water it when you're supposed to. And please leave the clippings on the lawn so that you can return the nutrients to the soil. They'll actually decompose in less than a week.

Do I need to mention that the lawn mower blade should be sharp? Why? Because sharp blades CUT the grass and dull blades TEAR it. Tearing it makes it more susceptible to fungal problems and, besides that, it's ugly when it turns brown on the top as it tries to heal itself.

Send your ideas, questions, or comments to: gardener@gvtc.com