

7 Simple Steps to a Better Home Lawn

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Maintaining the most attractive home lawn in the neighborhood takes time and effort. However, if your goal is an attractive looking, healthy lawn with a minimal amount of effort, it can be accomplished using some simple steps. The following is a brief description of those steps in order of importance, with emphasis on minimizing the amount of time and inputs dedicated to your lawn. For more details on these steps, check our turf website (www.agry.purdue.edu/turf or www.turf.uiuc.edu)

1. Mow at 3.0 inches

All cool-season lawn grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, and tall fescue in Indiana and Illinois perform best at a mowing height of 3 inches or more. Set the mowing height on your mower at 3 inches or the highest setting and leave it there all year.

2. Mow frequently

Mow as often as needed to never remove more than 1/3 of the leaf blade in a single mowing. In other words, if your mower is set at 3 inches, mow when the grass reaches 4 inches. This might be twice per week in the early spring and once every 2 to 3 weeks in the summer.

3. Return the clippings

Bagging the clippings increases the time and effort needed for mowing. Leaving the clippings returns valuable nutrients and does not harm the turf. Mulching mowers are effective for returning clippings, but older side-discharge mowers will also work acceptably.

4. Fertilize in the Fall

Fertilizing primarily in the fall promotes healthy turf while not stimulating excessive leaf growth which increases the need for mowing. Fertilize a minimum of twice per year, applying 1.0 pound nitrogen per 1000 ft² in September and 1.0 to 1.25 pounds nitrogen per 1000 ft² in early November. An additional application of 1.0 pound nitrogen per 1000 ft² in mid-to-late May will keep the lawn green and healthy throughout the summer.

5. Irrigate

During most summers in the Midwest, your lawn needs watering to maintain color and density. Water only as needed when the lawn first shows signs of water stress. These include a bluish-gray color of the grass and/or depressed footprints that remain visible after walking across the lawn. Irrigation might be needed only once every 2 to 3 weeks in the early summer, but twice per week in August. Conversely, if you do not regularly irrigate your turf, apply 1/2 inch of water every 3 to 4 weeks after the lawn has gone dormant (turned brown) to prevent significant thinning of the lawn. Once rains return the lawn will slowly regain its green color.

6. Control dandelions

Dandelions are the most visible, and often considered the most unsightly, weed by homeowners. Following the first five steps will minimize problems with dandelions. If dandelion problems still persist, mid-October applications of

broadleaf herbicides containing 2,4-D, MCP, and dicamba are effective. In many cases, spot spraying a herbicide directly on the occasional weed is all that is needed for minor dandelion problems. A less effective method is to apply an herbicide in the spring after dandelions have started flowering. Be sure to read, understand and follow all label instructions when using herbicides.

7. Control crabgrass

If you are practicing the first six steps of this publication, you should have little problem with crabgrass. If crabgrass is still a problem in your lawn, an application of a preemergence herbicide in the early spring is most effective. Apply by April 1 in the southern halves of Indiana and Illinois and by April 15 in the northern halves of Indiana and Illinois.

More Information

For more details on these steps, contact your local extension office or refer to the following publications (available at www.agry.purdue.edu/turf)

- AY-7 *Irrigation Practices for Home Lawns*
- AY-8 *Mowing, Thatching, Aerifying and Rolling Turf*
- AY-9 *Control of Broadleaf Weeds in Home Lawns*
- AY-10 *Control of Crabgrass in Home Lawns*
- AY-22 *Fertilizing Established Lawns*
- AY-26 *Should I Hire a Professional Lawn Care Service*
- AY-27 *Maintenance Calendar for Indiana Lawns*

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