

Here's part two of lawns as promised. For even more information contact Master Gardeners at local clinics from April through September. Always ask for the organic methods. Call the Extension Office at 360-337-7157 for clinic locations and times. Ask for the publication called "Natural Lawn Care for Western Washington" or a copy of Chapter 12 of "Sustainable Gardening" (EM8742). You can also contact Public Works at 360-337-5777 or 800-825-4940.

Fertilizing – Over-fertilized lawns are more susceptible to disease, thatch buildup and damage from drought. The best fertilizer is an organic or slow release fertilizer applied in mid to late May and again in early September. WSU research recommends no more than three to four pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet of lawn each year. Mulching mowers (grasscycling) supply one quarter of that requirement. If you want, you can fertilize only once a year in September. (A great idea this drought-predicted year.)

Aeration – If your lawn is healthy with good drainage and water absorption you won't need to aerate. Dig up a patch of lawn to see if soil is compacted. You can aerate using rented equipment. If soil is compacted more than two inches, hire a professional with equipment that penetrates six to eight inches deep. Aerating removes plugs of holes throughout the sod so water and nutrients can penetrate. Aerate when soil is moist. Run the aerator in several directions (east to west and again north to south). Leave the holes open (don't fill in with compost or soil.) If the plugs aren't too hard run over them with your lawn mower to break them up to become compost for the lawn. Many gardeners say this really dulls mower blades. Try raking up the plugs to put in your compost bins to biodegrade back into fluffy soil.

Thatch – Thatch is the result of natural decomposition. Grass clippings do not cause or produce thatch. (Grass clippings are over 90 percent water and provide nitrogen rich fertilizer during decomposing.) If the thatch layer is more than one-half inch thick you can remove it by spreading a quarter-inch layer of topsoil on your lawn to help the thatch decompose. You can also remove thatch with vertical cutting mowers or power rakes. Don't leave the removed thatch on your lawn, rake it up and put it in your compost pile. If you've never used weed and feed, herbicides or pesticides you can also use the removed thatch as mulch in your garden.

Aeration and thatch removal are performed in spring or fall. Aeration actually helps control thatch buildup. It's best not to do both tasks in the same month. Try aerating in the spring and thatching in the fall. You won't thatch every year.

If your lawn has very compacted soil, lots of moss and/or weeds, sometimes to save energy and alleviate stress, you might want to seriously consider tilling up your old lawn and starting over, turning that area into more gardening space or replacing it with ground covers. Why continue to care for a problem lawn if you're not enjoying the activity?

May and September are the best months to put in a brand new lawn. Still want to plant one now that you know how much work it's going to be? At least consider waiting until September this drought year.

New Lawns – It would take another two or three columns to thoroughly cover installing a new lawn. The most important factor besides sun (lots of it) and grass seed (use a combination of rye and fescue) is soil preparation. You'll need a foot of permeable soil with six inches of topsoil on top. Good drainage is also critical. Mix in ten pounds of 10-20-20 organic fertilizer for every 1000 square feet. The area to plant needs to be graded, rolled, raked and smoothed. A good rule is to loosen the soil until a 160-pound person walking across leaves one-half inch thick footprints. (This soil advice applies if you're laying down sod too.)

You'll distribute half the seed crossing back and forth from east to west and then half of the seed north to south. Lightly rake the seed in (only one-fourth inch deep). Roll the surface with a lawn roller that's half full of water. It's critical to keep the newly seeded area constantly moist (not soggy). Use several light irrigations each day for seven to ten days until the grass starts growing. Then water every two days for several weeks. You won't mow your new lawn for about six weeks. Do not use weed and feed or you'll destroy your lawn.

These ideas for planting a new lawn should get you started. We can discuss lawns again if necessary. In the meantime don't forget to consult with the Master Gardeners or write to me in care of this newspaper or email gardenmentor@yahoo.com.