

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 4-2-03) , ©2005

Here's the straight scoop on lawns from WSU Puyallup's Gwen Stahnke, guru of turf. The best way to have a great lawn is to plant it correctly to begin with. Very few gardeners have that luxury though, she admits. Most of us inherit a lawn put in before we arrived. If your lawn is twenty years or older you're probably battling many conditions newer grass seed has been bred to overcome. Don't despair though you can still alleviate many of the problems.

Moss can be raked up and removed this time of year and the area can be rototilled, raked, smoothed and reseeded. Make sure to establish grade so the surface can drain properly. Be careful when adding organic matter. Use no more than twenty percent and make sure it's well decomposed. Too much organic matter can cause poor drainage. When sowing grass seed spread half in one direction and half perpendicular (i.e. north to south and east to west) ensuring uniform seeding. Or, if your mossy lawn appears thick and green you might just want to live with the moss and enjoy the spongy thick green carpet.

When planting or reseeding a lawn choose certified seed. Certified seed has a blue tag and guarantees maximum germination. Using a mixture of several types of seed helps create an eco-system. Many gardeners like Kentucky bluegrass. This variety requires lots of sun and soils with nearly neutral pH. You'll probably want to avoid Kentucky bluegrass entirely but researchers are promising a Northwest variety in the near future.

Perennial Ryegrass is wear tolerant, has low thatching tendency, blends well with other grasses and requires moderate to high fertility. It germinates rapidly at low temperatures so will grow well and easily establishes this time of year. It prefers full sun. "Never buy a seed mixture with annual rye," says Stahnke. It should only be used in pastures.

Fine fescue is low maintenance, good for sandy soil and doesn't need abundant watering. But it doesn't stand up to heavy foot traffic. It is shade and drought tolerant. However it is susceptible to thatch and doesn't like wet soils.

To germinate grass seed keep the surface wet. When the grass has four or five leaves water less frequently, to help the roots grow deeply. You'll want to water July through September. The best way to see how much water is needed is cut out a triangular section and test your sod's absorption. Early morning or evening is the best time to water. You may have to water several times a day in increments to allow the water to soak in and be absorbed down to the roots. Notice which areas of the lawn have runoff or pooling of water too. You may have to adapt your watering practices to suit the various areas of your lawn.

Stahnke says many homeowners often notice dark green lawns thinking it's because of high fertilizing. "That's not usually the case," she says, "it's because grasses are being bred for darker color now." Gwen says never spread fertilizer without first calibrating your applicator. Never store fertilizer in your spreader. Load the spreader in your

driveway so you can control and sweep up spills instantly. That way you won't toast your lawn or have the spills travel down the drain into the streams or aquifer.

Some people can't afford or don't want to use a mulching mower so Gwen's tip is to treat your regular mower like a mulching mower by mowing more frequently and letting the clippings nourish the lawn just as you would with a mulching mower. "Remember that the clippings are full of nitrogen and water," she says. Make sure your mower blade is sharp and be sure you've properly reinstalled it.

Lawncare products and literature often recommend fertilizing four times a year. Stahnke says twice a year is perfectly acceptable and friendly for the environment. Choose a fertilizer with a ratio of 3-2-1 (N-P-K). You can easily skip the spring application she says. She prefers three times a year suggesting Memorial Day, Labor Day and Thanksgiving. Avoid weed and feed types of products. When deciding to use lime you'll want to have a soil test first. If lime is needed, find a product with small particles to aid in nutrient absorption.

The final word for today from Gwen is "Lawns need at least one-half inch of thatch; it holds your lawn together and makes it soft. When thatch is more than three-fourths of an inch then dethatch in several directions. Dethatch in April and then overseed.