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TM-2 Turf Maintenance

Key Points

- Residential lawns in the Truckee Meadows/Carson City area need cool season grasses such as bluegrass, turf type fescue, perennial rye and fine fescues.
- Mowing requires removing no more than 1/3 of the length of the grass blade. Maintain residential lawns at a height of 2 ½" – 3."
- Soil that is predominately clay requires slow on and off watering practices.
- Residential lawns require 4 pounds of actual nitrogen per 1000 sq. feet per year.
- Thick healthy lawns are the best defense against weeds, disease and insects.

Cool Season Grasses

With our cool nights and abundant sunlight the Truckee Meadows/Carson City environment is ideal for growing cool season grasses which include bluegrass varieties, turf fescues, fine fescues and perennial ryegrasses. Most residential lawns in our area are a mixture of bluegrass and fescues.

Mowing

Mowing correctly is one of the keys to a nice looking home lawn. Cool season grasses require that no more than 1/3 of the blade is removed. The lawn should be mowed to a height of 2 – 3 inches. Mowing shorter reduces food manufacturing potential, stresses the plant and encourages a shorter root system. It is the evenness of the cut that looks good, not the height. Keep the blades sharp for that clean cut. Mulching mowers are recommended and return a lot of nutrients to the soil through clippings without increasing thatch build up. Mow in different directions each time you mow.

Irrigation

A great number of lawns are overwatered, wasting large amounts of water during irrigation. This loss occurs as runoff and puddling, and to some extent, water drains below the lawn root system. The soils here are hard and water infiltration is very slow. Water must be applied slowly to allow for slow infiltration or runoff and puddling will occur. Irrigation should be scheduled to run for a short time, turn off and allow controller to run through all the remaining stations and then restart over within an hour. This on and off cycling will allow the water to infiltrate slowly to a greater depth. Watering should be done in short bursts (5 to 15 minutes per zone) back to back for an accumulated time of 45 minutes to 1 hour (or enough water to reach a depth of 6") every 3 – 4 days.

Thatching

A thin layer of thatch is referred to as mat. This mat is good because it adds some resiliency or cushion to the lawn. If this mat becomes a half-inch or more layer of live and dead tangled roots, leaves, rhizomes or stolons, it is called thatch, and it interferes with the healthy growth of grass. At this point it is necessary to rid the lawn of the layer.

Thatch can cause a variety of problems. It upsets the water movement into the ground. Water runs off rather than soaking in and the grass dies. Seeing the burnt grass, a homeowner may start to water more but for shorter periods of time. This causes the grass roots to grow closer to the surface and results in more thatch buildup. The grass, with its roots close to the surface and wet most of the time, becomes weakened and prone to heat damage and disease. The lawn can start to form yellow blotches and die when thatch gets too thick. Thatch provides a warm, moist area for fungus to start and traps most of the fertilizer and pesticide applications.

Thatch buildup is not just the result of poor irrigation practices, but a combination of many factors that include compaction, mowing too short (less than one inch for most grasses), light, frequent watering and over-fertilization particularly in the summer. The most effective way to reduce thatch is by core aeration. Power raking is also used but is not as effective.

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Aeration

Aeration is a process of plugging holes in a lawn with a machine. This process reduces thatch and compaction. Even though it does not remove as much thatch at one time as does dethatching, it is much more beneficial as it removes a core through the thatch allowing air and water to infiltrate into the lower zone and soil. Power raking or dethatching only removes the upper layer of thatch and leaves the lower layer still impervious to water and air infiltration. Dethatching can help with a very tight, thick lawn by thinning it out. One of the biggest benefits of aeration is the reduction of compaction especially on a slope. These holes trap and slow water down allowing it to soak in and not run off.

A cam driven aerifier is more efficient at plugging with great force. The plugs pulled should be allowed to dry and fall apart on the lawn. They add some soil and microbes to the surface to help break thatch down. The fluffy remainder will pick up with the mower. Aeration can be done anytime of the year -- usually in spring and/or fall.

Fertilization

Turf grasses are heavy feeders and require regular applications of a balanced, slow release, lawn fertilizer, preferably organic based. Neither a 16-16-16 nor starter fertilizer is recommended for feeding established turf. Overfeeding can create an overly lush lawn which is more susceptible to disease and insect attack, accelerates thatch buildup and requires more frequent mowing.

Lawns in our area require about 4 lbs. of actual nitrogen per 1000 sq. feet per year. This is applied in 4 – 5 equal applications. The timing is approximately April 15th, June 1st, September 15th and late October. If the lawn fades too much during the heat of summer a light feeding may be applied at the beginning of August.

Weed Control

The best defense against lawn weeds is a good healthy thick lawn. Weeds will quickly invade a thinning lawn. There are two types of weeds found in lawns -- broadleaf and grass weeds which are either annual or perennial -- and proper identification is critical for control. Annual weeds can be controlled with a pre-emergent for lawns before they germinate. This product will often come combined with a fertilizer and can be used for the first fertilizer application.

Existing broadleaf weeds must be controlled by a selective contact weed killer which can be sprayed on or applied with a fertilizer. The sprays -- **Ortho Weed-B-Gon** and **Monterey Spurge Power** -- will be much more effective.

Perennial grasses are the most difficult weeds to kill in an established lawn. Lawn grass is perennial so sprays used to kill perennial grass weeds will also kill the lawn. Weeds such as tall fescue, nimblewill and quackgrass must be sprayed or wiped with a non-selective herbicide such as **Roundup**.

Weeds of all kinds can be mechanically controlled by digging. Care must be taken to remove the entire root system or it will simply sprout again. Proper mowing, fertilization and irrigation are the best controls for weeds in our lawns.

Revised 7/10

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