

# Lawns

*Keeping lawns green and weed-free can take a lot of work and water* and create a lot of waste.

It doesn't have to. Building healthy soil and watering properly can help grow a beautiful, healthy lawn that outgrows most weeds and other problems with less work, water, fertilizer, pesticide, and waste. The keys to keeping your lawn and the environment healthy with less work are:

- 🌿 **Mow high and let the clippings lie.**
- 🌿 **Fertilize moderately with slow-release or organic fertilizer.**
- 🌿 **Water deep and let the surface dry before watering again.**
- 🌿 **Revitalize and reseed tired, thin lawns.**
- 🌿 **Rethink weeds. Do not use weed and feed!**
- 🌿 **Consider alternatives to problem lawns.**

## Mow High—and Let the Clippings Lie

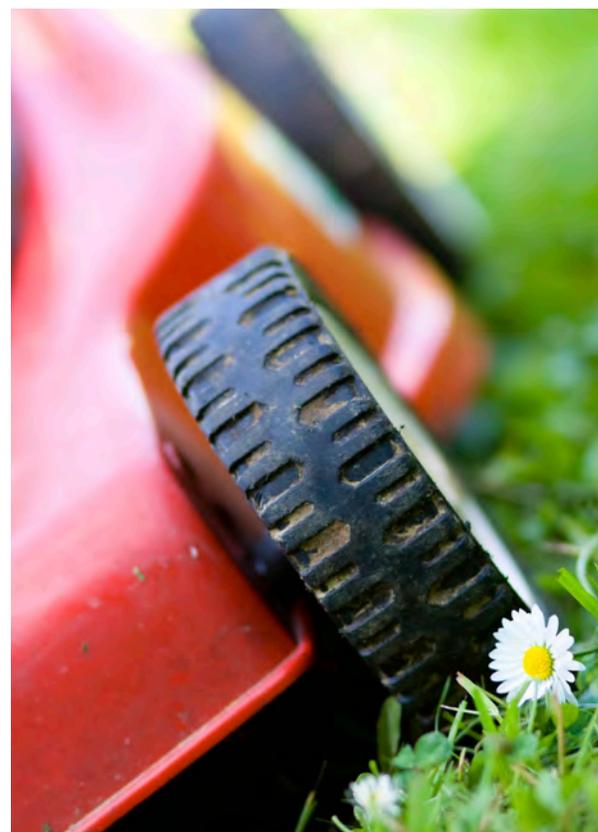
Proper mowing is the simplest step to creating a healthy lawn. You have to mow, so why not do it right? Here's how.



**Leave clippings on the lawn—“Grasscycle.”** Leaving clippings takes half as long as bagging them and supplies 25-40% of lawns' fertilizer needs.

The clippings DO NOT cause thatch. Any mower can be used to grasscycle by simply removing the bag and covering the outlet shoot, though newer “mulching mowers” do a better job of hiding the clippings.

**Mow often, removing 1/3 of grass length each time.** Frequent cutting—weekly during spring and early summer—maintains a healthy balance of roots and leaves. Shorter clippings decompose quickly if left on the lawn. Cutting too much at once stunts growth and is harder work too!



**Mow it high!** Taller grass looks greener, shades out weeds better, and supports stronger roots than short cropped lawns. The grass varieties most of us grow are healthiest mowed 2 to 3 inches high. (Bentgrasses should be mowed 1 to 1-1/2 inches high.)

**Keep mower blades sharp.** Sharp blades make mowing easier and leave fine clippings that disappear quickly when left on the lawn. Dull blades leave ragged leaf edges that make the lawn look brown and let disease into plants.

## Fertilize Slow

Moderate fertilizing with slow-release products promotes healthy, balanced growth. Too much fertilizer is bad for lawns, lakes, and streams. Testing soil every three years ensures efficient fertilization. Use information below and details in the *Fertilizing* guide as general guidelines.

### Use "slow-release" or "natural organic" fertilizers.

Slow-release fertilizers supply nutrients gradually to support steady growth that resists pests, drought, and cold damage. Quick-release fertilizers may cost less, but much of their nutrients can wash right through the soil into storm drains, streams, or groundwater. Look for products labeled "natural organic" or "slow-release."

### Fertilize in fall and spring.

Fertilize in September to build healthy roots for winter hardiness and strong growth next year. Fertilizing in May can boost growth when it naturally slows. Slow-release fertilizers and recycling nutrients by grasscycling can sustain the lawn through summer.

Add lime every 2-4 years, based on soil test results. Lime makes nutrients more available to plants and helps grass to outcompete weeds and moss.

## Water Deep

The soil is your lawn's underground water tank.

If you water as deep as the roots grow—usually several inches—stored water will keep the lawn green for at least a few days (unless the soil is extremely shallow or sandy). Frequent shallow watering encourages thatch and shallow roots, which are easily damaged by drought and pests.

**Dig Down! Check It Out!** Your lawn and watering system are unique. How often and how long you need to water depends on the grass and soil types, root depth, sun exposure, sprinklers, and weather. The best way to provide the right amount of water is to observe grass growth and soil moisture. Use a shovel or soil corer to check soil in several spots to see how deep the roots grow and if water is getting down to them. Check before and after watering to see when water is needed and how deep it penetrates.

 **How Deep?** See how deep the light colored grass roots grow. Water long enough so the entire root depth is soaked a few hours after watering.

 **How Long?** Run fixed sprinklers for 10 minutes, and rotating or oscillating sprinklers at least 30 minutes. Then wait a few hours and dig in to check how deep water has reached. Repeat until the entire root depth is moist.

 **How Often?** Let the soil dry out 1/4 of the root depth before watering again. Coarse sandy soil may dry out in just a day or two. Clay can stay moist for several days.

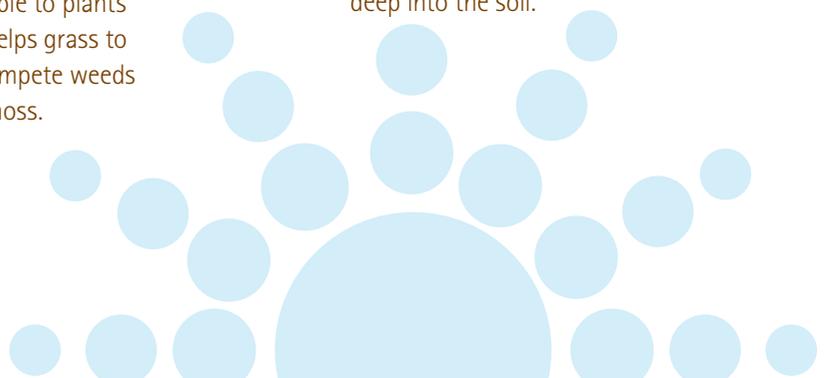
### Other Signs It's Time To Water:

- Footprints remain long after you walk across the lawn.
- Leaves look dull or bronzed.
- It is hard to push a screwdriver blade deep into the soil.



## ALTERNATIVES TO PROBLEM LAWN AREAS

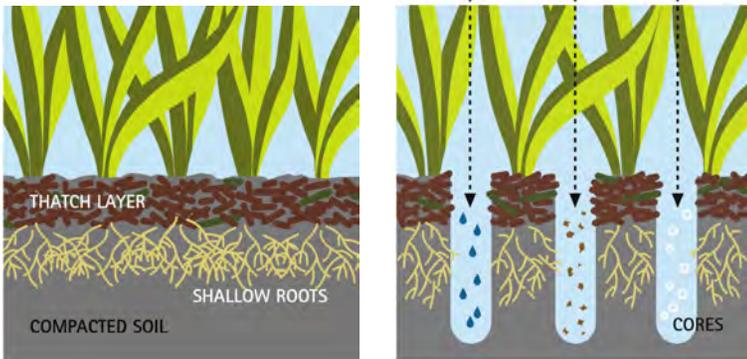
Grass grows best on level, well-drained soil in full sun or partial shade. Trying to grow healthy lawns on steep slopes, in shady areas, or poor soil takes a lot of work—and resources. If moss is thriving in your lawn, it indicates that your lawns' environmental conditions do not favor the grass. Aerating, overseeding, and adding lime and fertilizer can help; or look for other plants better suited to these conditions. If you live next to a lake, stream, or Puget Sound, leave a "buffer" of native vegetation along the shore. It will filter out pollutants, provide food and shade for the fish, and prevent bank erosion. See the *Lawn Alternatives* guide for more information.



## Revitalize Tired, Mossy Lawns

A lawn is only as healthy as the soil it grows in. Unhealthy or mossy lawns may best be tilled under, amended with an inch or two of compost or topsoil, and replanted. But many unhealthy lawns can be rejuvenated with less drastic steps:

**Breathe New Life Into Soil.** Compacted soil stops air, water, and nutrients from reaching roots. "Core aerating" pulls plugs of soil (1/2 inches wide by 2 to 6 inches deep), leaving holes that let air, water, and nutrients get to the roots. Rent a power aerator or have a landscaper aerate compacted soil in April, May or September.



BEFORE

AFTER AERATING

**Overseed.** Thin lawn areas left after drought or weed removal should be reseeded with desirable grasses before weeds sprout in the open spaces. Use an "overseed" mix designed for Pacific Northwest conditions, and cover with fine compost for best results.

**Dress It Up.** Spreading one-quarter to one-half inch of fine-screened compost on the lawn, or a mix of sand and compost, renews soil without digging it up. Top-dressing is most effective after core aerating opens channels into the soil. Use only high-quality compost to avoid spreading weeds. Spread dressings with a shovel and rake to even it out.

**Thatch Removal.** Thatch is a brown, spongy mat of dead roots and stems on the soil surface. Thatch layers over one-half inch deep keep nutrients, air, and water from roots. Good watering, mowing, and fertilizing practices can prevent thatch; and core aerating helps

THIS LAWN  
ISN'T DEAD, IT'S  
JUST ASLEEP!

Each year more people around Puget Sound are saving water and work by letting their lawns go dormant in summer. Some of the common questions people have about letting their lawn go golden include:

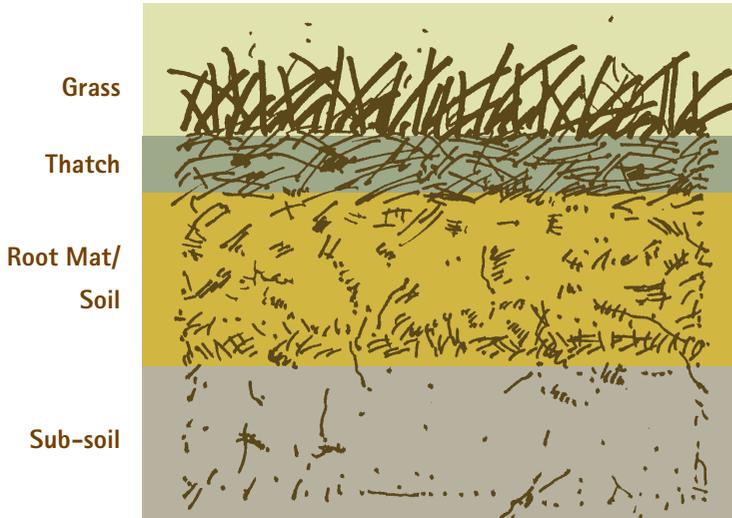
**Will the grass die?** Most dormant lawns recover fine with rain and cooler weather in fall.

**Should I still water it a bit each week?**

Lawns can go completely dry. Watering a little each day or once a week is generally a waste of water—it barely wets the surface and none gets to roots. Soaking the lawn a few times each summer may help some types of grass recover better in fall.

**Can I do anything special to help it recover in fall?** Fertilize and "overseed" in fall to help the lawn recover and fill in bare spots before weeds can.

break down buildup under 1/2 inch thick. Thicker layers of thatch can be removed using a power rake that can be rented or brought in by a landscaper. Manual thatch raking is only practical for tiny lawns.



## Rethink Weeds



Some plants we call "weeds" are actually useful and attractive. Before you start pulling or spraying weeds, think twice. Clovers extract nitrogen from the air to nourish plants. Every time it is mowed the clippings fertilize the lawn. Lawn daisy flowers brighten up the lawn. Do you really want to get rid of them?

Vigorous lawns can out-compete many weeds. When weeds get the upper hand, it often indicates low soil fertility. Accept a few weeds, and crowd out problem weeds by growing a dense healthy lawn.

Control minor weed infestations by hand pulling or spot spraying only the weeds. Use a long handled weed puller to easily remove dandelions without bending over. Weeding is easiest when the soil is moist.



Don't use "weed and feed" type products to treat a few scattered weeds or as a preventative. It does not prevent weeds from sprouting, but it does kill clovers and flowering herbs, and can wash off lawns into streams, polluting the water.

## Rethink Moles

Moles are a sign of fertile soil, they do not eat plants. Stomp down their hills to discourage them and rake the soil out to spread the fertility.



## RESOURCES

**Bellevue's Natural Lawn and Garden website**  
[www.bellevuewa.gov/naturallyardcare.htm](http://www.bellevuewa.gov/naturallyardcare.htm)

### **Bellevue's Natural Gardening Guides**

*Composting Food Scraps • Composting Yard Trimmings • Drip and Soak • Fertilizer • Garden Design • Lawn Alternatives • Lawns • Mulch • Pests, Weeds, and Diseases • Plant Right • Seasonal Calendar • Soil • Watering*

**For copies**, visit Bellevue's Natural Lawn and Garden website (*above*) or call Bellevue Utilities at 425-452-6932.

### **The Garden Hotline**

[www.gardenhotline.org](http://www.gardenhotline.org) or 206-633-0224

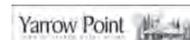
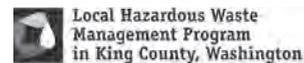
### **Natural Yard Care Neighborhoods**

[www.naturallyardcare.info](http://www.naturallyardcare.info)

### **Grow Smart, Grow Safe**

[www.growsmartgrowsafe.org](http://www.growsmartgrowsafe.org)

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