

# Northwest Lawn Care

## Gray Barn Green Thumb Guide



With proper care and realistic expectations, you can create and maintain a beautiful, lush lawn. In order to get that, there is a bit more required than an occasional mowing and once a year fertilizing. Mowing, thatching and aeration, fertilizing, watering and moss control are all components of a happy, healthy lawn.

If you are battling moss, please evaluate the area that you want to have a lawn. Is this area mostly shade or under some of our big Douglas Fir trees? If so, you should consider using it for something other than lawn. Grass wants to grow in full sun with good drainage, yet ample water in the heat of summer. Moss thrives in moist shade. You can kill it, but it will come back, quickly. If your obstacle is large trees, you should reconsider as well. The big, established trees in our area are water hogs. Their huge root systems take all the water they can find, leaving nothing for surrounding plants. Below is a list of four major factors in establishing a healthy lawn.

### **Mowing**

Regularly mowing your lawn will help keep it healthy and flourishing. There are two extra steps you can take to maximize a mowing, leave the grass clippings and mow high. Leaving the clippings acts like a mulch and helps the lawn retain water. Doing so also lets the nutrients from the clippings return to and feed the soil. To further aid in water retention, adjust your mower blade so you are trimming your grass 2-2 1/2 inches tall. Tall blades will help shade the soil, which stops water from evaporating. When the grass is growing fast, April through June, you'll need to mow more frequently. This may be weekly, depending on how fast it's growing.

### **Dethatching and Aerating**

If your lawn looks sickly or just isn't performing as you feel it should, thatching and aerating are the first things you should do. Please don't start applying chemicals to treat something that isn't a problem! Thatch is a thick layer of grass stems and roots that are inhibiting fertilizer and water to penetrate the soil. If your thatch layer is very thick, the grass roots may be growing in it which means they are getting ample water as they would from being in soil. This can stunt your lawn causing it look less than perfect. You can buy a thatching blade for your mower or do it by hand with a fine tine leaf rake. Dethatch your lawn in spring, only when the thatch layer is about 3/4 to an inch thick.

Aerating is necessary to open the soil up so it is able to take in water and nutrients more efficiently. Aerating involves punching holes that are three to four inches deep into your lawn. These holes will allow water and nutrients to get into the root system of your grass quicker. It also alleviates compaction. There are a handful of ways to aerate, hand tools,

shoes and renting a machine are all effective methods. The best time to aerate is in the spring.

## Fertilizing

Fertilizing is required in order to have a beautiful green lawn. Fertilize once in spring, after you aerate and once in fall, before the lawn goes dormant for the winter. We recommend using an organic fertilizer that will help feed the soil as well as the grass. Healthy soil makes for healthy plants. As mentioned above, leave your grass clippings on the lawn to help fertilize also. Topdressing the lawn with a thin layer of compost is also very beneficial. By doing so, you are building healthy soil that will stimulate and encourage growth. This helps you create a stronger lawn that can tolerate and bounce back from stress (drought) easier. Do this before the first frost in fall.

## Watering

Water is expensive, how much you water your lawn is going to vary from home to home. Soil and thatch will also play a part in how much water your lawn needs. During our drier months, typically July and August, your lawn will need more water, about an inch a week. Use a low flow sprinkler and keep the spray down so you don't waste water and maximize what stays on the lawn. Watch for runoff also. If you see a lot of water pooling in a low spot or running down the driveway, the soil is not absorbing it, so turn the water flow down. You can place empty tuna cans around the grass to see where you are getting adequate water and what areas are being missed. Remember, water wisely and once the first rain comes in the fall, your brown lawn will green up instantly.

## Moss Control

Living in the Northwest, moss is going to happen in your yard. Fall through early spring is very moist because of our rainy weather. Because the soil doesn't get too dry out between storms, creates a consistently moist environment that moss thrives in. The most important thing to know is if you are struggling to grow grass in a shady spot that gets minimal sun, you're fighting a losing battle. Grass needs full sun and well draining soil to thrive. If grass isn't thriving, moss will take advantage and fill in the spaces. You can apply a moss killer, rake out the dead moss, top dress and overseed to try and get the grass to take. Consider grass alternatives or turn the existing lawn area into a shade garden if you are unable to get grass to grow. If you do have sun and are still battling moss, work on improving your soil through aerating, dethatching and topdressing.

## References and further reading

Gardening Month by Month in WA and OR Alison Beck and Marianne Binetti 2003

Maintaining a Healthy Lawn in Western Oregon OSU Extension Service 2001

Gardening in Western Washington WSU Extension Office 1996