# Organic Lawn Care

PEST MANAGEMENT FOR NORTH CAROLINA

NC STATE EXTENSION

## Organic Lawn Care

A GUIDE TO LAWN MAINTENANCE AND PEST MANAGEMENT FOR NORTH CAROLINA

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## Contents

Organic Lawns: Some Considerations	3
Establishing a New Lawn	3
Plan before Planting	3
Cool-Season Turfgrass Cultivars	6
Prepare the Site	7
Planting Methods	9
Watering	10
Mowing	11
Fertilizing	11
Pests in New Lawns	11
Maintaining an Established Lawn	12
Keys	12
Watering	12
Mowing	13
Fertilizing	13
Aerifying	15
Dethatching	15
Integrated Pest Management and	
Organic Lawn Care	15
Weeds	15
Insects	16
Diseases	
Renovating an Established Lawn	22
Soil Preparation	22
Timing	23
Replanting	23
Care after Planting	23
Overseeding Warm-Season Turfgrasses	23
Summary	24
-	

## **Special Topics:**

#### Integrated Pest Management Tips

IPM Tip—Lawn Grass Mixtures	4
IPM Tip—Limit Nitrogen (N)	9
IPM Tip—Planting and Seeding Rates	10
IPM Tip—Mowing	13

#### How-To Tips

How to Prepare a Soil Sample	8
How to Establish Summer Dormancy	12
How to Make Use of Clippings	15
How to Make Compost	26

## Appendices

25
25
25
25
26
27
27
28
28

## Tables

Table 1. Characteristics of Principal Lawn
Table 2. Warm-Season Cultivars.    6
Table 3. Dates and Rates to Plant Cool- and
Warm-Season Turfgrasses7
Table 4. Fertilizer Recommendations
for New Lawns9
Table 5. Suggested Basic <sup>a</sup> Maintenance
Fertilization Rates of Nitrogen (N) for
Established Lawns14
Table 6. Organic Fertility Sources* 14
Table 7. Weeds Associated with Various Lawn
Management Problems16
Table 8. Some Organic Insect-Control Strategies18
Table 9. Diseases of Cool-Season Turfgrasses20
Table 10. Diseases of Warm-Season Turfgrasses21
Table 11. Organic Disease Control Methods
and Products 22

## **Organic Lawn Care**

## The Keys

- Select the right location for the lawn. Do not plant a lawn on a steep slope or in a poorly drained or very shady location.
- **Prepare the site** by following soil test recommendations, adding organic matter to very sandy or very heavy clay soils, and insuring good drainage.
- Select the right turfgrass for the location. Turfgrasses vary widely in color, texture, and density. Choose the one best suited to the region, intended use, and desired appearance.
- Plant at the best time and choose the best planting method for the turfgrass selected. Follow good management practices to prevent and minimize problems rather than trying to correct problems after they occur.
- Develop an integrated pest management (IPM) program that emphasizes the correct identification of problems and pests and the use of cultural, manual, mechanical, and biological controls when necessary.

## **Organic Lawns: Some Considerations**

Lawns are more than attractive recreational spaces for homes and communities; they also serve many useful purposes. Lawns stabilize the soil and prevent erosion. They reduce runoff of rainwater and filter surface water before it recharges drinking water supplies. Like other landscape plants, lawns absorb sound and reduce air pollution in our increasingly urban landscape.

Although the benefits of an established lawn are numerous, some lawn maintenance practices have environmental side effects that merit attention. Technology has provided effective and relatively inexpensive means for managing our lawns. Applications of small amounts of chemicals can often reduce pest populations in a short time with little effort. With proper cultural management, use of some chemical pesticides can provide more thorough and longer-lasting pest control than strictly non-chemical methods. However, environmental effects of applying chemical pesticides and fertilizers are still being evaluated, and many people enjoy a sense of security when they use a non-chemical approach to lawn management.

Natural or "organic" methods of lawn care can provide more than just a sense of protecting the environment. Organic lawn care emphasizes selection of the right turfgrass for the location and good management to maintain a healthy lawn. If you adopt an organic lawn care strategy, you will not need to store potentially dangerous chemical pesticides around the home, and you will not have to find safe ways of disposing of empty containers. If you use organic fertilizers and biological and cultural pest management instead of pesticides, you will eliminate concerns about the effects of pesticide residues on people (especially children who play on grass), pets, birds, and other wildlife. Potential risk to applicators from exposure to pesticides is also reduced.

People who practice organic lawn care can be proud of their efforts to recycle resources by composting yard waste and using other available waste products in their lawns. An organic lawn can provide all of the benefits of a healthy lawn without the use of synthetic chemicals. Establishing a healthy stand of turfgrass is the best way to defend against pests. Many problems with weeds, diseases, and insects can be prevented or minimized by good planning and careful management.

## **Establishing a New Lawn**

## **Plan before Planting**

Many of the most important steps toward a successful lawn are taken before any planting begins. Plan for easy maintenance and pleasing appearance. Turfgrass will not grow well in very shady spots or in poorly drained areas, and it will be hard to maintain on steep slopes.

Select the right turfgrass for the site. No one type of turfgrass is best suited to all situations. The turfgrass you choose to grow should be matched to the region and climate and suitable for the intended use and desired appearance. Some turfgrasses are more resistant to diseases than others.

If possible, plant the lawn during the season best suited to the variety selected. Planting density should be adequate to establish a good stand, and the seeds may need watering to encourage emergence. After seedlings emerge, they will need to be watered, fertilized, and mowed to ensure early growth. These establishment practices can affect the growth and development of your lawn for many years to come.

## Select the Right Turfgrass

Planting an improved, adapted grass is one of the best ways to avoid pest problems. Both cool-season and warm-season turfgrasses are grown in North Carolina, where environmental conditions vary greatly. The climate

of the mountain counties is similar to that of the northeastern United States where cool-season turfgrasses such as fescue and bluegrass are best adapted. The southeastern counties have a climate suitable for the warm-season grasses such as centipedegrass or bermudagrass. The transition zone in the central part of the state is often too cold in the winter for the warm-season turfgrasses and too hot in the summer for the cool-season turfgrasses to grow well. The micro-climates of sites in the transition zone should be considered in selecting a turfgrass for a particular lawn. The warm-season turfgrasses are best adapted for lawns with sunny southwest exposures, while the cool-season turfgrasses are best adapted for lawns with northern exposures. Evaluation of the climate or the exposure direction of the lawn will help determine the best type of turfgrass(es) to grow to avoid severe disease problems in the future.

In addition to regional climate factors, the characteristics of each site and your goals for it will determine which types of turfgrass are appropriate. Choose an adapted turfgrass that best meets your preference for color, density, and texture. Where heavy traffic is expected, use a tough, aggressive, wear-tolerant turfgrass. Take into consideration the amount of time, effort, and money you are willing to put into maintenance. Turfgrasses are best able to fend off pests when they are healthy and not struggling to survive in stressful environmental conditions.

Cool-season turfgrasses grow best in the spring and fall and less actively in the summer. They stay reasonably green in the winter. Tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass, fine fescue, and perennial ryegrass are common types of cool-season turfgrasses. Warm-season turfgrasses are slow to green up in the spring, grow well in the summer, and go dormant after the first heavy frost.

Table 1 gives information on the characteristics and requirements of various turfgrasses grown in North Carolina. Study the chart to help select the appropriate turfgrass for your region and the intended use of the lawn. The map in Figure 1 locates counties by region. Table 2 gives further information on characteristics and requirements of specific warm-season turfgrasses.

#### IPM Tip-Lawn Grass Mixtures

Selection of adapted and disease-resistant cultivars is the best method for disease control.

Use a blend of several cultivars of cool-season turfgrasses to reduce damage from diseases. A blend of tall fescue cultivars or tall fescue mixed with Kentucky bluegrass will increase the resistance of the lawn as a whole to damage from common turfgrass diseases.

Warm-season turfgrasses are generally not mixed, although bermudagrass blends are available.



Figure 1. Climatic regions in North Carolina.

2 | Organic Lawn Care: A Guide to Lawn Maintenance and Pest Management in North Carolina

<b>Table 1. Characteristics of Prin</b>	icipal Law	rn Turfgra	sses Grov	vn in Nort	h Carolina	-						
			Adaptation			Appea	rance				Maintenance	
Lawn grass	Shade	Heat	Cold	Drought	Wear	Color	Texture	Preferred Planting season	Rate of establish- ment <sup>a</sup>	Cutting height (inches)	Fertilizer 1,000 sq ft (Ib N/year)	Mowing Frequency <sup>b</sup>
Mountains					-							
Kentucky bluegrass	IJ	щ	DV	IJ	5	med-dark	medium	Fall	moderate	1.5 to 2.5	2 to 3	medium
Kentucky bluegrass/fine fescue*	G	ш	NG	IJ	ш	med-dark	fine-med	Fall	moderate	1.5 to 2.5	2 to 3	medium
Kentucky bluegrass/tall fescue*	IJ	IJ	DV	Ð٨	DV	med-dark	med-coarse	Fall	fast	2.5 to 3.5	2 to 3	high
Kentucky bluegrass/tall fescue/fine fescue	Ð٨	5	DV	٩G	ÐV	med-dark	med-coarse	Fall	fast	2.5 to 3.5	2 to 3	high
Kentucky bluegrass/ perennial ryegrass	IJ	ш	DV	G	ÐA	med-dark	medium	Fall	fast	2 to 3	2.5 to 3.5	med-high
Tall fescue*	IJ	9	DV	Ŋ۵	DV	medium	med-coarse	Fall	fast	2.5 to 3.5	2.5 to 3.5	high
Piedmont												
Bermudagrass (common)*	۷P	۶۸	VP	ш	ш	medium	medium	Sp/Su	fast	0.75 to 2	4 to 4.5	med-high
Bermudagrass (hybrid)	VP	DV	٩.	ш	ш	light-dark	Fine-med	Sp/Su	fast	0.75 to 2	3 to 6	high
Bahiagrass*	IJ	IJ	٩	ш	IJ	med-dark	coarse	Sp/Su	moderate	2 to 4	-	high
Centipedegrass*	IJ	Ð	Ч	IJ	۹.	light	coarse	Sp/Su	slow	1 to 2	1 to 2	low
Kentucky bluegrass/tall fescue*	ŋ	9	Ŋ	DV	Ŋ	med-dark	med-coarse	Fall	fast	2.5 to 3.5	2 to 4	high
Kentucky bluegrass/tall fescue/fine fescue	Ð٨	5	DV	٩G	ÐV	med-dark	med-coarse	Fall	fast	2.5 to 3.5	2 to 4	high
Tall fescue*	IJ	IJ	DV	Ð٨	ÐŊ	medium	med-coarse	Fall	fast	2.5 to 3.5	2.5 to 3.5	high
St. Augustinegrass*	DV	DV	Р	Ð	4	med-dark	coarse	Sp/Su	fast	2 to 4	2 to 3	med-high
Zoysiagrass*	Ð	DV	F-G	Е	9	med-dark	fine-med	Sp/Su	very slow	0.75 to 2	1 to 3	low-med
Coastal Plain												
Bermudagrass (common)*	VP	DV	VP	Ш	Ц	medium	medium	Sp/Su	fast	0.75 to 2	3 to 4.5	med-high
Bermudagrass (hybrid)	VP	DV	Ρ	Ш	Ш	light-dark	fine	Sp/Su	fast	0.75 to 2	3 to 6	very high
Bahiagrass*	ŋ	Ð	Ρ	ш	ш	med-dark	coarse	Sp/Su	moderate	2 to 4	1	High
Centipedegrass*	9	Ð	Ρ	Ð	Р	light	coarse	Sp/Su	slow	1 to 2	1 to 2	Low
St. Augustinegrass*	DV	DV	Р	9	Ъ	med-dark	coarse	Sp/Su	fast	2 to 4	2 to 4	med-high
Tall fescue*	G	Ð	DV	DV	ŊО	medium	med-coarse	Fall	fast	2.5 to 3.5	2 to 4	High
Zoysiagrass*	G	ЪV	F-G	ш	9	med-dark	fine-med	Sp/Su	very slow	0.75 to 2	2 to 4	low-high
Key: E = Excellent; VG = Very Good, G = *Can be seeded	= Good; F = Fa	air; P = Poor;	VP = Very Po	Jor								

Establishment rate is dictated by planting dates, seeding and planting rate, intensity of culture, and environment. Sodding will result in a fast establishment. Note: Some improved cultivars are better adapted and more pleasing in appearance than the comparison rating provided for a given lawn grass.  $^{\rm b}$  Mowing frequency is dictated by season, intensity of management and use.

Organic Lawn Care: A Guide to Lawn Maintenance and Pest Management in North Carolina | 3

#### Table 2. Warm-Season Cultivars.

Turfgrass	Cultivars	Comments
Bermudagrass	Common-types Many are available	Can be seeded.
	Tifway 419 TifTuf Premier Pro Celebration T-10 Tifsport TifGrand GN-1 Patriot Discovery	Require frequent mowing. Must be vegetatively planted.
	Tahoma 31 Latitude 36 Northbridge	Cold tolerant. Better suited to western piedmont than other bermudagrass cultivars.
	Tifdwarf Champion MiniVerde	Not recommended for home use because of high management requirements.
Zoysiagrass	Cavalier Emerald Geo Leisure Time Meyer (Amazoy) Zeon Zorro	Emerald has fine texture. Meyer most cold tolerant.
	El-Toro Empire Innovation Jamar Palisades	Quick to establish from plugs.
	Compadre Zenith	Generally purchased as sod, but can be seeded. Seed supply is generally limited.
Centipedegrass	Common Tifblair	
St. Augustinegrass	Raleigh	Cold tolerant through the piedmont.
	Common Palmetto Mercedes	May not have sufficient cold tolerance.

**Note:** Because the release and evaluation of turfgrass cultivars change rapidly, contact a turfgrass extension specialist for the latest cultivar test results.

#### **Plant at the Best Time**

Planting times and rates are given in Table 3. **Cool-season turfgrasses** are best seeded from mid-August to mid-October, depending on location. Seeding after these dates increases the chance of poor germination or seedling failure caused by cold temperatures. Spring seeding is often less satisfactory because seedlings do not have time to become well established before hot weather begins.

If spring seeding is necessary, do it as early as possible to take advantage of cool weather and the absence of weeds. Remember, many weeds grow best during this time of year, too. Seeding cool-season turfgrasses after March generally results in a need to reseed the following fall.

Annual ryegrass can be used as a temporary cover until fall. However, it is better to seed the desired cool-season grasses and renovate in the fall. This may require the assistance of a professional. Install cool-season turfgrass sod at any time during the cooler portions of the growing season when the ground is not frozen.

**Warm-season turfgrasses** may be seeded or planted vegetatively (by sprigs or plugs) from March through July. Dormant vegetative material (sod or plugs) may be planted with a good chance of success. Vegetative planting material can be obtained from a local sod producer. To reduce the chance of winter injury, plant before late summer so the turfgrass can become well established before winter. Sod will not produce roots unless the soil temperature stays above 55°F for several weeks.

## **Cool-Season Turfgrass Cultivars**

Numerous tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass, and fine fescue cultivars have been tested for performance in North Carolina. Due to the great number of suitable cultivars, lists of the better performing cultivars can be found separate from this publication.

Note that companies often blend multiple cultivars together for sale in the retail market but use simple product names to enhance brand recognition. This is especially true with tall fescue. The combination of grasses is often recommended because there is no one turfgrass that will perform well under all conditions. So, when shopping for tall fescue seed, the name on the front of the bag may not represent or identify the cultivars that make up the product. To add to the confusion, the

#### Table 3. Dates and Rates to Plant Cool- and Warm-Season Turfgrasses

		Planting Rate/1,000 sq ft		
Turfgrass	Planting Date <sup>a</sup>	Seeds <sup>b</sup>	Space Planting <sup>c</sup>	Broadcasting
Mountains				
Kentucky bluegrass	Aug 15 to Sep 1	1.5 to 2		
Kentucky bluegrass/fine fescue	Aug 15 to Sep 1	1.5 + 1.5		
Kentucky bluegrass/tall fescue	Aug 15 to Sep 1	1 + 5		
Kentucky bluegrass/tall fescue/fine fescue	Aug 15 to Sep 1	1+5+1		
Kentucky bluegrass/perennial ryegrass	Aug 15 to Sep 1	1.5+1		
Tall fescue	Aug 15 to Sep 1	6		
Piedmont				
Bermudagrass (common)	Apr to July	1 to 2	0.75	3 to 10
Bermudagrass (hybrid)	Apr to July		0.75	3 to 10
Bahiagrass	March to June	5		
Centipedegrass	March to July	0.25 to 0.50	1.0 to 2.0 <sup>d</sup>	
St. Augustinegrass	Apr to July		1.0	1
Kentucky bluegrass/tall fescue	Sep 1 to Sep 15	1 + 5		
Kentucky bluegrass/tall fescue/fine fescue	Aug 15 to Sep 15	1+5+1		
Tall fescue	Sep 1 to Oct 1	6		
Zoysiagrass*	Apr to July	1 to 2	1.0 to 2.0 <sup>d</sup>	3 to 10
Coastal Plain				
Bermudagrass (common)	Apr to July	1 to 2	0.75	3 to 10
Bermudagrass (hybrid)	March to July		0.75	3 to 10
Bahiagrass	March to June	5		
Centipedegrass	March to July	0.25 to 0.50	1.0 to 2.0 <sup>d</sup>	
St. Augustinegrass	Apr to July		1.0	
Tall fescue	Sep 15 to Oct 15	6		
Zoysiagrass	March to July	1 to 2	1.0 to 2.0 <sup>d</sup>	3 to 10

<sup>a</sup> Optimum date of planting. Seeding beyond these dates increases the chance of failure. Sod consisting of cool-season turfgrasses can be installed at any time when the ground is not frozen. Warm-season turfgrasses can be installed as long as soil temperature exceeds 55°F.

<sup>b</sup> Pounds of seed per 1,000 sq ft.

• Bushels of sprigs per 1,000 sq ft. (1 sq yd of turf pulled apart is equivalent to 1 bushel of sprigs.)

<sup>d</sup> Often plugged using 3 sq yd of turf cut into 2-inch squares on 12-inch centers to plant 1,000 sq ft.

cultivars and the percentage of each cultivar within the bag of a specific product may change from year to year, but the product name often remains unchanged to maintain brand recognition. Under close inspection, however, the bags are required to list the cultivars in the blend and the percentage of each cultivar by weight within the bag. It may not be easy to find a bag that contains only cultivars from our recommended lists. It is suggested, however, that at least 50% of the contents consist of NC State's recommended cultivars. The higher the percentage, the greater the chances of obtaining a sustainable lawn.

## **Prepare the Site**

Another key to a successful organic lawn is careful preparation of the site. A healthy lawn needs a rooting environment favorable to soil organisms and turfgrass roots. In an organic lawn, weed control is best accomplished by following the steps listed below:

 If topsoil from the original site is free of weeds, insist on saving it. If grading is needed, remove the topsoil (usually 4 to 8 inches) and stockpile it nearby. Topsoil brought in from other areas will bring weed seeds along with it. Covering topsoil with a dark plastic cover for several weeks will kill many plants but may not kill all seeds.

- 2. Do not allow the builder to use the lawn site as a dumping ground. Paint, lumber, and concrete can be harmful to turfgrasses.
- 3. Install tile drain in poorly drained areas. Get professional advice about the type of drain and installation.
- 4. Build protective walls to save trees if the final grade is to be appreciably higher than the present level.
- Shape the underlying subsoil to the desired contour and redistribute topsoil uniformly above the subsoil. A 1% to 2% slope is needed for proper drainage away from buildings.
- 6. Water the area to enhance settling. Fill areas that settle unevenly to avoid standing water. Insist that any topsoil added to the site be weed free.

For heavy clay soils or very sandy soils, mix 1 to 2 cubic yards of organic matter (compost, peat moss, or leaf mulch) per 1,000 square feet into the top 6 to 8 inches of soil. Clay soils are prone to compaction and require frequent aerification.

When soil acidity or nutrient levels are too high or too low, plant growth and the action of beneficial soil microbes will be limited. On sites where trees have been growing for many years, the pH may be 4.0 or lower. Turfgrasses used in North Carolina grow best in soils with a pH near 6.5, except centipedegrass which prefers a pH near 5.5. A soil with pH of 5.5 is ten times more acidic than a soil with pH of 6.5!

The pH of the soil determines the availability of nutrients in the soil to plants. Because lime and phosphorus move



Figure 2. To ensure uniform coverage when applying fertilizer or lime, apply half while moving back and forth in one direction and the other half while moving at a right angle to the first pass

very slowly through the soil, they should be incorporated to a depth of 6 to 8 inches before planting. Failure to adjust soil pH and phosphorus levels throughout the rooting zone prior to seeding can result in shallow rooting, poor drought tolerance, and inefficient uptake of nutrients. Over application of lime or nutrients can also inhibit plant growth, so it is important to apply the correct amount for your soil.

Even a well-adapted turfgrass can suffer from disease if the soil has not been adequately prepared. Most of the soils in the state have a low pH and low phosphorus levels, especially if the area was wooded just before the lawn was planted. Soil tests should be taken from the site early enough to know how much lime and phosphorus should be incorporated before planting. The depth of incorporation of lime and phosphorus determines the depth of rooting of the turfgrass. A deep and healthy root system results in a healthy plant that can better tolerate environmental stresses, including pests.

Test the soil before applying lime or fertilizer. The only way to determine whether the acidity (pH) and nutrient levels are adequate for the turfgrass you plan to grow is to have a soil test analyzed by a reputable soil-testing laboratory. Local N.C. Cooperative Extension centers have sampling boxes and submission forms. Mail samples directly to the North Carolina Department of Agriculture Soil Test Laboratory (4300 Reedy Creek Rd., Raleigh, NC 27607). It may take several weeks (or longer in late winter and early spring) to receive results of a soil

#### How to Prepare a Soil Sample

For new lawns, sample 10 to 12 locations to a depth of approximately 4 inches (the depth you expect your tiller to reach). Take a uniform slice with a shovel from each location or use a soil-sampling tube. Combine these samples in a clean plastic bucket and mix thoroughly. About one cup of soil from the combined sample is needed for analysis. For a site with uniform soils, only one combined sample may be needed. If the soil varies greatly in color or texture, additional combined samples should be taken from each distinct soil area.

**For established lawns, the recommended sampling depth is three inches.** This shallower sampling depth will detect problems in the rooting zone more quickly than a deeper sample.

#### Table 4. Fertilizer Recommendations for New Lawns

During Site Preparation	1	
Materials to use	Amounts to apply*	Comments
Lime	Follow soil test recommendations	Apply uniformly with a rotary or drop-type spreader. Apply half of the
Phosphorus (P <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub> )		fertilizer in one direction and the second half at right angles to the
Potassium (K_O)		first pass.
		Incorporate the lime and nutrients into the top 6 to 8 inches of the
		soil using a rototiller.
Nitrogen (N)	For a new lawn, apply 1 lb N/1000 sq ft.	Soil tests do not routinely analyze for soil N.

\*Note: Organic fertilizers with a guaranteed analysis will have three numbers on the label. These numbers represent the content in percent of nitrogen (N%), phosphate (phosphorus as  $P_2O_5$ %), and potash (potassium as  $K_2O$ %) contained in the fertilizer. Thus, a 50-pound bag of composted manure with an analysis of 4-4-2 would contain 2 pounds of N (50 × 0.04 = 2.0), 2 pounds of  $P_2O_5$ , and 1 pound of  $K_2O$ . In this example, 50 pounds of the composted manure should be applied to each 1000 square feet of area to be treated.

Surface Application at Time of Planting									
Materials to use	Amounts to apply	Comments							
starter-type fertilizer (ratio of 1-2-2)	0.5 lb N/1,000 sq ft	Apply to the soil surface at the time of seeding							
Follow-up Application (	Follow-up Application (when new seedlings are between 1 and 2 inches high - approximately three weeks after they emerge)								
Materials to use	Amounts to apply	Comments							
complete fertilizer	0.5 to 1 lb N/1,000 sq ft. These rates are	Organic sources such as composted manures can be safely used, but will usually supply higher loyels of <b>P</b> and <b>K</b> per unit of <b>N</b>							
(ratio of 3-1-2 or 4-1-2)									
For faster spread of vegetativ	vely planted warm-season turforasses, add $0.5$ to	1 pound of nitrogen per 1 000 square feet every three to four weeks during							

For faster spread of vegetatively planted warm-season turfgrasses, add 0.5 to 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet every three to four weeks duri the growing season until grass covers the soil completely.

test, so plan ahead. The soil test will indicate the proper amount of lime and nutrients required per 1000 square feet for the type of turfgrass you wish to grow (see Table 4).

Rake the site to establish a smooth and level final grade. Soil particles should be no larger than marble size, and pea-gravel size is even better. Hand raking is the best way to level the soil and work out hills and hollows. Allow time for rain or watering to settle the soil, then roll lightly to firm the soil before seeding. Before seeding, hand rake again to break up the crusty surface. Protect water

## IPM Tip – Limit Nitrogen (N)

To decrease susceptibility of lawn grasses to pests and environmental stress, avoid applying more than 0.5 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet to cool-season turfgrasses in June, July, and August. Likewise, avoid high nitrogen fertilization of warmseason turfgrasses in the fall or winter. quality by sweeping any fertilizer off paved surfaces and back onto the turf area.

## **Planting Methods**

Lawns can be established by seeding or vegetatively planting. Buying poor-quality plants or seed often results in less-than-satisfactory performance by the turfgrass, pest problems, and general disappointment by the lawn owner. Selection is especially important when establishing a lawn. Read the information on the seed tag carefully, and make sure you purchase seed with no noxious weed seed and low levels of other crop seed. One way to be sure you have seed or planting material that is true to type, free of noxious weed seed, and contains low levels of other crop seed is to purchase *certified seed* or *sod.* "Certified" indicates the seed or plants have met certain standards to assure high quality and low levels of contaminants.

**Seeding** is usually the most economical method of establishing turfgrasses. Both rotary and drop-type spreaders work well. Apply half of the seed in one direction and the other half moving at right angles to the first pass. Lightly cover the seed by hand raking or dragging with chain link fence. Roll the soil lightly to firm the surface and provide good seed-to-soil contact

Mulch the surface with weed-free straw, hay, or a commercial mulch if erosion may be an issue or to help conserve moisture. Use one bale per 1,000 square feet for warm-season turfgrasses and one to two bales for cool-season turfgrasses. Once mulch is in place, stabilize it by rolling or watering. Twine netting can be used if the site is very windy. If applied evenly and lightly, these materials need not be removed.

**Vegetative planting** is necessary for those turfgrasses for which seed is not available. When this method is used, keep the plant material fresh and moist from removal site to planting area. Protect it from direct sun. Once it is installed, keep it moist until established. Fertilize with 0.5 to 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet every one to three weeks for fastest spread. Times and rates for planting vegetative turfgrasses are given in Table 3. Several methods of vegetative planting useful in lawn areas are described below.

*Space planting* is the planting of separate shoots or sprigs (runners, cuttings, or stolons) at regular spacings. This labor-intensive method is best used for planting small areas. Spacing is determined by how fast the turfgrass will spread, how fast you want it to cover, and how much material is available. The closer the spacing the faster the lawn will establish.



Figure 3. In space planting, always leave some part of the sprig above the ground.

*Broadcasting* is the uniform distribution of sprigs (cut stems) over the entire area. After sprigs are thrown or dropped onto the surface, the sprigs are pressed into the top 0.5 to 1 inch of soil by hand or using straight coulters. Large areas planted with bermudagrass or zoysiagrass sprigs require a minimum of 3 to 5 bushels of sprigs per 1,000 square feet; and 5 to 10 bushels for extremely fast cover. St. Augustinegrass is seldom established through broadcasting because the stems are too sensitive.

*Plugging* is space planting individual pieces (2 inches or larger) of sod. Depending on desired coverage rate

#### IPM Tip—Planting and Seeding Rates

Proper seeding and planting rates will help to control disease damage. As an example, in the case of tall fescue, a high seeding rate (10 or more pounds per 1000 square feet) will usually result in rapid greening of the lawn in the fall but poor survival the following summer. Many small seedlings do not develop deep root systems and are more susceptible to drought stress and diseases such as brown patch.

Lower seeding rates (4 to 6 pounds per 1000 square feet) result in slower greening of the lawn in the fall but also in better developed plants that are more likely to survive disease and drought stresses the following summer.

and turfgrass, these may be planted from 6-inch to 10-foot centers. This is an excellent way to introduce a better-adapted turfgrass into an existing lawn in an effort to replace the existing turfgrass by crowding it out. Zoysiagrass, St. Augustinegrass, and centipedegrass are often planted by plugging.

Sodding uses strips of turfgrass from one site to establish an 'instant' lawn on another site. Install sod as soon as possible after it has been harvested to prevent injury. Sod should be installed within 24 hours of delivery. Plan to unstack and unroll the sod if it cannot be laid within 48 hours. While installing, keep stacks of sod in the shade to lessen the chance of heat buildup. Soil should be moist (but not overly wet) before laying sod. Irrigate the soil several days before delivery to settle the topsoil and provide necessary moisture. Start sodding from a straight edge (driveway or sidewalk) and butt strips together, staggering the joints in a brick-like pattern. Avoid stretching sod. Use a knife or sharp spade to trim to fit irregularly shaped areas. Lay sod lengthwise across the face of slopes and stake the pieces to prevent slippage. After the sod has been placed, press the sod with a roller to ensure good sod-to-soil contact. Then begin watering.

## Watering

To prevent seeds, seedlings, and new turfgrass from drying out and to prevent soil from eroding, keep the top 0.5 inch of the soil moist. This may require light watering two to three times a day for 15 to 20 days. After the third mowing, water to a depth of 6 to 8 inches about once a week or when needed. Bluegrass takes 7 to 14 days longer to germinate than other cool-season turfgrasses. As the seedlings grow and root, water less often but for longer periods. For mixtures containing bluegrass, do not make the mistake of decreasing water as soon as the seedlings appear. Kentucky bluegrass may take as long as three weeks to germinate, so continue watering until the bluegrass seedlings emerge.

## Mowing

The frequency of mowing is governed by the amount of growth, which is dependent on temperature, fertility, moisture conditions, season, and the natural growth rate of the turfgrass. The suggested heights of cut for different species are given in Table 1. In home lawns, we suggest not removing more than one-third of the plant material with each mowing.

- 1. Use a mower with a sharp blade.
- 2. Begin mowing as soon as the turfgrass is 50% higher than the desired height. (Measure from the base of the plant at the soil surface.) For example, mow tall fescue back to 3 inches when it reaches 4.5 inches.
- 3. Mow only when the soil and plants are dry to reduce the risk of spreading disease and injuring the turf.
- 4. Allow clippings to remain on the lawn. They can reduce the need for fertilizer by 20% to 30%.

## Fertilizing

- Fertilize the new seedlings approximately three weeks after they emerge using a complete fertilizer (N-P-K) that provides about 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. A fertilizer with a 3-1-2 or 4-1-2 analysis is preferable but can be substituted with another complete analysis fertilizer. Organic sources such as composted manures can be used safely but will usually supply higher levels of P and K per unit of N. (See Table 6 for information on available organic fertilizer products.)
- 2. Apply fertilizer uniformly with a rotary or drop-type spreader.
- 3. For faster spread of vegetatively planted warmseason turfgrasses, add 0.5 to 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet every four to six weeks during the growing season until turfgrass covers the soil completely.
- To decrease susceptibility of lawn grasses to pests and environmental stress, do not apply more than 0.5 pound of nitrogen in fertilizer to cool-season

turfgrasses in June, July, and August or to warmseason grasses in late fall or winter.

## Pests in New Lawns

**Weeds.** Broadleaf weeds are common in new plantings. However, many weeds will be controlled by taking proper care of the topsoil before seeding, by maintaining optimum growing conditions for the turfgrass species, and by mowing at the proper height after establishing the lawn. Weed control in sodded lawns is best done through inspection of the sod before laying. Sod should be installed with no gaps between edges to reduce the opportunity for light to reach the soil surface and encourage weed growth. The complete coverage and quick establishment of sod generally prevents weeds from becoming established. In organic lawns, handpulling is the preferred method of weed removal.

**Diseases**. Seedling diseases are best controlled by establishing the turfgrasses properly and not mulching too heavily. Turfgrass diseases often appear after periods of prolonged wetness regardless of fertilization strategies. In organic lawns, where chemical fungicides are not used, good management is the best way to avoid or minimize disease. Compost and organic fertilizer have also been shown to minimize certain turfgrass diseases.

- 1. Select a disease-tolerant turfgrass adapted to your region.
- 2. Do not overwater, overfertilize, or underfertilize.
- 3. Reduce shade and improve drainage.
- 4. Increase airflow by reducing low-hanging tree branches.
- 5. Mow at the highest recommended height using a sharp blade.
- 6. Mow when the turfgrass is dry.
- 7. Remove large clumps of clippings (or spread them evenly in a thin layer).

If disease does become established, removing the effects without using chemical fungicides is difficult. Occasionally, the turfgrass will overcome the disease and return to a healthy appearance. If the turfgrass does not survive, renovation of the area will be necessary.

**Insects.** Insects are seldom a problem in new lawns because bare soil or soil covered by sparse vegetation usually is not an adequate food source to support insect populations. Ants and fall armyworms, however, are notable exceptions. Fire ants can be transported in sod (usually in warm-season turfgrasses) and other ants live

in areas of bare soil. Fall armyworm damage can be more severe in newly-sprigged, sodded, or seeded areas and are a particular issue in new lawns or areas that are under mechanical disturbance or construction.

## Maintaining an Established Lawn

#### Keys

**Uniform application of nutrients** throughout the top 6 to 8 inches of the root zone is very important! Unless the entire potential root zone has a consistent pH and adequate nutrients and is sufficiently porous, turfgrass roots will struggle to occupy this zone and may die during periods of stress. Applications to the surface have little effect beyond the top 2 or 3 inches, while turfgrass roots may extend more than 8 inches into the soil.

**Trees and shrubs may need to be pruned to reduce shade and improve air movement.** Shade and reduced air movement cause the relative humidity and moisture levels to remain high for long periods of time, promoting conditions favorable for disease. Eventually, either the trees or the turfgrass may need to be removed, since it is difficult to maintain a good lawn in the shade.

#### How to Establish Summer Dormancy

During dry weather turfgrasses should generally be watered one to two times per week with a weekly total of approximately 1 inch of water. Avoid frequent, light irrigations that keep the foliage wet and provide favorable conditions for development of disease.

If you do not plan to water throughout the summer, lawns can be allowed to go dormant. To ease a lush, actively growing lawn into dormancy, water deeply and infrequently, mow high, and do not overfertilize with nitrogen. In the absence of rain, water dormant lawns every three weeks to prevent turf loss from heat and drying. Do not be alarmed by brown, withered leaves; they are normal signs of dormancy. Turfgrasses are able to withstand prolonged periods of drought.

(Note: **Do not regularly water established coolseason turfgrasses during the summer unless you plan to do so all summer.** Many lawns are lost by discontinuing irrigation in mid-summer.) By the time a lawn has grown enough to require three mowings, you can consider it established. As shoot and root growth mature to this point, the plant is better able to fend for itself and the amount of daily care and attention needed will decrease. You can now focus on maintaining a healthy stand of turfgrass through proper mowing, timely watering and fertilization, and effective pest control. In addition, you may need to aerify, remove thatch, and overseed parts of your lawn.

With time, some areas of the lawn may deteriorate and require renovation. Renovation involves more than normal maintenance or spot renovation. Additional soil preparation and reseeding may be needed to restore healthy growth.

## Watering

Improper watering of lawns results in waste of water, added cost, and unhealthy turfgrass.

- Water only when lawns show signs of moisture stress. A dark, bluish-gray color; footprints that remain in the turfgrass for some time after walking through it; and wilted, folded, or curled leaves are indications that the lawn needs water. Unless the turf is being allowed to go dormant, a delay in watering at first signs of wilt can result in permanent damage to turfgrasses.
- 2. Adjust any automatic irrigation system to supplement rainfall so that the lawn is not overwatered.
- Water in the early morning to reduce the risk of disease, water loss through evaporation, and uneven water distribution due to wind. Also, the demand for water by industry and municipalities is usually low at this time.
- 4. Water established lawns to a depth of 6 to 8 inches to encourage deep rooting. Usually, this can be accomplished by applying 1 inch of water per week. Cans or a rain gauge can be used to determine how much water is being delivered in a certain period of time. It takes 640 gallons of water to apply 1 inch of water to 1,000 square feet of lawn.
- 5. Match watering technique with soil type and site slope. Apply water to clay soils until runoff is about to occur; wait 30 minutes for the water to be absorbed; and re-water until the desired depth or amount is achieved. This same technique can be used for slopes and compacted soils. Few lawns established on clay soils can absorb more than 0.5 inch of water per hour. Sandy soils require more frequent watering; 0.5 inch of water every third day is usually sufficient.

#### IPM Tip—Mowing

Maintaining the proper mowing height helps in controlling damage from disease. Most diseases will be less severe in taller turfgrass. Also, turfgrasses should be mowed when the foliage is dry. Mowing when the turfgrass is wet can spread the disease-causing organisms from infected leaves to healthy ones more rapidly.

## Mowing

**Equipment.** Generally, rotary mowers are used on landscape turfgrasses. Reel mowers may be used for some turfgrasses when low mowing heights (less than 1 inch) are desirable. The cleanest cut and best mowing are obtained when the mower blades are sharp. Dull mower blades reduce lawn quality by tearing the turfgrass instead of cutting cleanly, creating many ragged leaf ends that quickly wither and bleach and provide easy ports of entry for disease. Using a sharp mower is especially important for turfgrasses that are difficult to mow, such as zoysiagrass and bahiagrass. A properly sharpened and balanced mower blade will also reduce mower vibration, lengthen mower life, and reduce fuel consumption by as much as 22%.

**Frequency.** To maintain a high quality lawn, mow often enough that no more than one-third of the leaf height is removed with each mowing. The frequency of mowing is determined by the desired turfgrass height and by the amount of growth. Growth rate depends on temperature, fertility, moisture, sunlight, and the natural growth rate of the turfgrass. In most instances, this may amount to weekly mowing. Suggested mowing heights are presented in Table 1. If the lawn gets too high during wet periods, wait until the turfgrass is dry and then raise the mowing height to mow no more than one-third of the leaf. Gradually return to the proper height of cut by mowing more frequently (wait one or two days between mowings), but at gradually lower heights, until the proper height is achieved.

## Fertilizing

Most organic fertilizers contain between 3% and 10% nitrogen. However, this nitrogen is usually slow to release as it is typically tied up in complex organic molecules. The nitrogen is released as soil microbes break down the molecules for food and as the molecules slowly dissolve in water. It is called 'slow-release' because it may take

several weeks or even months to become available to the plant. As such, growth response by the turfgrass plants may be gradual over a period of one to two months. Therefore, when fertilizing with organic fertilizers, expect slower greening in the spring, and extended growth in the fall if temperatures remain adequate for growth. Extended dry or cold periods may delay release of nitrogen from organic fertilizers.

To maintain pH in the range of 6.0 to 6.5 (5.5 for centipedegrass) and to prevent nutrient deficiencies, the soil should be tested every two to three years. For established lawns, the recommended sampling depth is 3 inches. Lime may be put on any time during the year. However, winter is often the best time of year to lime since there is less traffic, gentle winter rains minimize runoff, and alternate freezing and thawing help incorporate lime into the soil.

Nitrogen (N) requirements cannot be determined by a soil test. Use Table 5 for determining amount and timing of nitrogen applications. To decrease susceptibility of turf to pests and environmental stress, do not apply high nitrogen fertilizer to cool-season turfgrasses in the late spring or summer or to warm-season turfgrasses in the fall or winter.

The number of organic fertilizers available is increasing in response to a growing demand. Organic fertilizers, as defined in this publication, come from animal, plant, or mineral sources and contain no chemically formulated additives. They are commonly made of livestock waste, municipal waste, bone meal, dried blood, manures, vegetable meals, feather meal, fish scraps, and crushed minerals. Some products claim to be 'organicallybased' and 'natural-based', with man-made chemical formulations of either nutrients or pesticides added. Careful inspection of the label is the best way to determine the organic status of the product. Table 6 gives more information on organic sources of fertilizers.

**Timing.** In order to keep turfgrass healthy so that it can withstand weeds, insects, and diseases, it is important to fertilize the plants when environmental conditions are right for their optimum growth. A soil pH in the range of 6.0 to 6.5, adequate moisture and oxygen, and temperatures above 50 to 55°F favor microbial activity and enhance nutrient release. Do not fertilize when the turfgrass is not growing and cannot take up the nutrients. Nutrients not used by the turfgrass will be available to weeds and stimulating shoot growth at the wrong time increases susceptibility to disease. See Table 5 for suggested basic fertilization scheduling for different turfgrasses in North Carolina.

#### Table 5. Suggested Basic<sup>a</sup> Maintenance Fertilization Rates of Nitrogen (N) for Established Lawns

	Monthb									Pounds			
Turfgrass	J	F	м	A	м	J	J	A	s	0	N	D	ft / year
Bahiagrass					0.5		0.5						1
Bermudagrass °					1		1		1				3
Centipedegrass <sup>c d</sup>					1								1
Tall Fescue		0.5							1		0.5		2
Kentucky bluegrass		0.5							1		0.5		2
KY bluegrass/fine fescue		0.5							1		0.5		2
KY bluegrass/tall fescue		0.5							1		0.5		2
KY bluegrass/perennial ryegrass		1							1		1		3
St. Augustinegrass <sup>c</sup>					1			1					2
Zoysiagrass					1		1						2

Notes:

<sup>a</sup> Rates should be increased for higher levels of management. Total nitrogen application rates double these basic rates would be typical for a high rate of fertilization. All rates are pounds of nitrogen per 1000 square feet. Multiply the rate by 43.5 to convert to acres. Follow table suggestions in the absence of soil test recommendations. Except on centipedegrass, use a complete (N-P-K) fertilizer that has a 3-1-2 or 4-1-2 analysis. Fertilize established centipedegrass using a low phosphorus, high potassium fertilizer with an analysis approaching 1-1-2 or 1-1-3. Fertilizers without phosphorus are preferred if soils supporting centipedegrass show moderate to high levels of phosphorus.

<sup>b</sup> Dates suggested are for the central piedmont of North Carolina. In the western part of the state, dates may be one to two weeks later in the spring and earlier in the fall; in the eastern part of the state, plan on one to two weeks earlier in the spring and later in the fall.

<sup>c</sup> In the absence of soil test recommendations, in August apply about 1 pound of potassium per 1,000 square feet to bermudagrass, centipedegrass, St. Augustinegrass, and zoysiagrass.

<sup>d</sup> Centipedegrass should be fertilized very lightly after establishment. An additional fertilization in August may enhance centipedegrass performance in coastal locations. Do not use any phosphorus on centipedegrass after establishment.

Nutrient	Product	Source(s)	Comments
Nitrogen (N)	fertilizers,	sludge, composted turkey litter, animal	Complete N-P-K fertilizer; also supplies micronutrients.
Natural Organic	municipal	proteins, bone meal, wheat germ	
		seaweed, kelp extracts	Source of N, Fe, and some micronutrients; often mixed
			with organic matter sources.
	sodium nitrate	mined	Very quickly available source of N; overapplication may
	(aka Chilean		lead to leaching! Irrigate following application to avoid
	nitrate)		burn.
Phosphorous (P)	bone meal	pulverized poultry bones	More readily available P; dust, may be hard to apply.
	rock phosphate	mined	Little plant-available phosphorous except in super (0-20-0)
			or triple super (0-46-0) phosphate forms.
Potassium (K)	wood ash	home	Up to 4% elemental K; also an excellent source of lime and
			may raise pH of soil
	compost	home	Up to 1% elemental K potassium sulfate mined naturally
			occurring; 0-0-52 analysis.
Iron (Fe)	humates	mined extractions	Sources of various nutrients including iron.
Calcium	calcium sulfate	mined gypsum, dolomitic (with Mg) or	Source of Ca (and Mg if dolomitic); used to lower pH.
		calcitic limestone	

#### Table 6. Organic Fertility Sources\*

\*Notes about using natural organic fertilizers:

Because organic fertilizers have low analyses (relatively low amounts of nutrients per weight of the product), split applications may be necessary with some products to supply the proper amount of nutrients without covering the lawn with a heavy layer of fertilizer.

Complete-analysis natural organic fertilizers may also provide:

> Organic matter as a carbon source for soil organisms

> Micronutrients essential for plant growth

> Disease suppression (Applications of some organic fertilizers have suppressed dollar spot and brown patch in cool season turfgrasses.)

> Reduced potential for nitrate leaching to the groundwater

> Low potential for fertilizer burn

## Aerifying

Soils that are subject to heavy traffic are prone to compaction. Compacted soils reduce drainage, increase runoff, and inhibit root growth. Aerifying helps to alleviate compaction.

- 1. Use a device that removes soil cores and be sure to aerify after a soaking rain or irrigation to ensure that the soil is penetrated to a depth of 2 to 3 inches.
- 2. Chop the cores and, if possible, distribute them by dragging with something like a chain-link fence.
- 3. Aerify when the lawn is actively growing so that it can recover from any injury. It is best to core coolseason turfgrasses in the fall. Coring cool-season turf in the spring may unnecessarily promote weed growth. Core warm-season turf in the late spring or early summer.
- 4. Some lawn care and landscape companies offer coring service if rental equipment is not available.

## Dethatching

Sod-forming turfgrasses such as Kentucky bluegrass, bermudagrass, zoysiagrass, St. Augustinegrass, and centipedegrass tend to build a thatch layer when they are heavily fertilized and watered. When thatch exceeds 0.5 inch, lawns should be dethatched. Thatch can be reduced by using any one of various tools that may be available to you.

- 1. Make several light power rakings instead of trying to remove too much debris at one time.
- 2. Small accumulations of thatch (less than 0.75 inch), can be removed from warm-season turfgrasses by mowing as low as possible at the time of spring green-up and then raking.
- To avoid injury to centipedegrass and St. Augustinegrass, use 3-inch blade spacing on a power rake.
- 4. Some lawn care and landscape companies have specialized equipment and offer power-raking service.

## Integrated Pest Management and Organic Lawn Care

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is an important component of any lawn care program. IPM can be defined as a system of keeping lawn pests at nondamaging levels by maintaining healthy plants, correctly

## How to Make Use of Clippings

Many homeowners remove lawn clippings because they think that the clippings add to the buildup of thatch, which can be harmful to the lawn. Actually, thatch is made up of roots, stems, and the lower portions of leaves that are below the mower blade. Frequent mowing, mowing when the turfgrass is dry, and proper fertilization are the best ways to reduce thatch buildup. Clippings contribute very little to thatch. They decompose quickly and release valuable nutrients, reducing fertilizer needed by as much as 20% to 30%.

After prolonged periods of wetness, long clippings may shade or smother the turfgrass. In this case, rake and remove the clippings. Collected clippings can be used as mulch around trees and shrubs or added to compost.

identifying pests through regular scouting, determining action thresholds, evaluating all possible control options, and implementing selected controls. Controls used to prevent or remedy unacceptable pest activity or damage include biological, chemical, cultural, manual, and mechanical. An organic lawn care program will make use of all of these except chemical control options.

## Weeds

A healthy, dense lawn is an indication of good cultural and fertility practices and is the best defense against weed problems. A lawn that is mowed at the proper height, fertilized at the correct rates and times, and irrigated efficiently will minimize infestation by weeds. Weeds in a lawn usually indicate a lack of proper growing conditions for the turfgrass. Table 7 describes weeds associated with various problem conditions.

If an area is heavily shaded, on a steep grade, or in a depression prone to wetness, the turfgrass cannot effectively compete against weeds that are better adapted to these conditions. If these conditions exist, consider other landscape options for the area or plan to focus more resources caring for these areas.

When weeds occur in small numbers, use a spade or trowel to remove the entire plant, including the roots, to prevent regrowth. In areas of heavy weed infestation, the entire area may need to be treated and renovated. Sheets of black plastic will block sunlight and water, while raising temperatures in the soil. Covering an area for 7 to 10 days will kill most weeds. Sometimes existing turfgrass will survive. Also, a thick layer of compost or mulch can adequately kill weeds, but be careful not to introduce new weeds with the compost.

Table 7. Weeds Associated with Various Lawn Manag	ement
Problems	

Condition	Indicator Weeds
Dry soil	prostrate spurge, black medic, yellow wood sorrel, goosegrass, annual lespedeza, birdsfoot trefoil, prostrate knotweed, bracted plantain
Wet soil	moneywort, annual bluegrass, alligatorweed, pearlwort, moss, liverwort, rushes, sedges
Compacted soils	annual bluegrass, annual sedge, annual lespedeza, broadleaf plantain, corn speedwell, goosegrass, prostrate knotweed, prostrate spurge
Low nitrogen	birds foot trefoil, black medic, broom sedge, clovers, common speedwell, hawkweed, moss, white clover, crabgrass
Excess nitrogen	annual bluegrass, chickweed, moss, ryegrass
Infrequent mowing	bull thistle, burdock, chicory, smooth bedstraw, sweet clover, teasel, wild carrot
Close/frequent mowing	annual bluegrass, chickweeds, moss, pearlwort, crabgrass

## Insects

The best defense against insect damage is a healthy lawn. Healthy turfgrass with deep roots will withstand insect damage better than plants weakened by environmental stresses. Insects survive by eating leaves and roots found in the thatch layer. Thatch buildup can be minimized by using a sharp blade to mow, mowing at the proper height, and watering and fertilizing at the right rate and time. These practices will limit favorable conditions for insect habitation.

Not all insects are pests, and a healthy lawn may very well have active insect populations that cause no damage. Learn to identify the few insects that may cause damage. Every 7 to 10 days, inspect the turf for insect damage. Pests are most likely to be abundant at the boundary between a damaged area and healthy turfgrass. Identify any problem correctly before applying a treatment. Techniques for searching for insects (scouting methods) vary with different pests. Contact your local Cooperative Extension center for help. Many insect problems can be treated in spots, and the entire lawn seldom needs treatment.

**Billbugs.** Billbugs feed on stems of turfgrass by puncturing stems, crowns, and leaves. Turfgrass will turn brown in patches and is easier to pull up than healthy turfgrass. Adults are active in late March to early April. Tiny, legless grubs, with the rear end wider than the head, appear in June and July.

**Chinch Bugs.** Chinch bugs suck juice out of the turfgrass. Adult, small black-and-white bugs, are active in late March to early April. Red-bodied, first-generation nymphs usually are present in May. Damage will usually appear in summer. St. Augustinegrass will first turn yellow, then brown to white.

Scouting Method: Cut both ends out of a large metal can and insert it in the turf in an area where the turfgrass is yellowed and declining. Most of the can should remain above ground. Fill the can with water. Wait 5 minutes for the chinch bugs to float to the top of the water. Examine three or four places in the suspected area. Parting the turfgrass to observe the soil surface for chinch bugs also works.

#### Fall Armyworms, Cutworms, and Other Caterpillars.

Look for an area that attracts birds to feed, dead patches of turfgrass, or caterpillars feeding on leaves. Direct damage will appear as closely chewed areas.

Scouting Method: Mark off an area 1 square yard in a location of suspected infestation. Mix 2 fluid ounces of liquid dishwashing soap in 4 gallons of water and drench the area with the solution. Insects will emerge to the surface. Kneel to observe the area closely. Insects will return to the soil in 5 or 10 minutes. If no insects are found, examine other suspected areas.

**Fire Ants.** Fire ants cause damage by constructing large mounds that are unsightly and can weaken and crack surrounding cement or concrete slabs. Most importantly, fire ant stings can cause severe allergic reactions in some individuals.

Scouting method: Look for dome-shaped mounds (not mounds with a central opening) or lines of ant hills containing several sizes of worker ants. Take care not to touch fire ants or disrupt mound activity as fire ant stings are painful.

**Green June Beetle Grubs, Japanese Beetle Grubs, and Other White Grubs.** Green June Beetle larvae come to the soil surface at night to feed and create distinctive, quarter-sized emergence holes that can be easily identified. White grub feeding creates loose, yellow, stressed patches of turfgrass. White grubs are C-shaped larva with brown heads and three pairs of legs.

Scouting Method: At the edge of an area of discolored turf, use a spade to cut three sides of a 1- square-foot piece of sod about 3 inches deep. Pull or pry the sod back like a flap. Use your fingers to sift through the soil and roots. Examine roots for chewed remnants and check the soil for grubs.

**Ground Pearls.** Ground pearls are small scale insects that appear as small cysts (pearls) or wingless, pink insects. Ground pearl damage starts as general yellowing and then browning of turf as populations increase. Ground pearls are most common in centipedegrass.

Scouting Method: April through July, look for 1/16- to 1/8inch pink, wrinkled insects in the root zone or near the soil surface. In summer or winter, look for 1/8-inch long pearly cysts in the soil, up to 8 to 10 inches deep.

#### Mites (Bermudagrass and Zoysiagrass).

Bermudagrass and zoysiagrass mites are tiny, worm-like arachnids that cause occasional damage to turfgrass. Bermudagrass mites feed beneath the leaf sheath and cause rosettes, or tufts, to form at plant nodes. Zoysiagrass mite feeding causes the leaf to roll in on itself from one side, creating an arch-like appearance.

Scouting Method: Mites are almost impossible to see without a hand lens. However, because mite damage is so distinctive, it is often easy to diagnose. If unsure, consult with your local N.C. Cooperative Extension center for identification or submit a sample to the North Carolina Plant Disease and Insect Clinic. **Mole Crickets.** In the spring, look for tunneled areas and loose turfgrass. In the summer, look for loose, patchy areas of thinning turfgrass. In the late summer, bare areas will appear.

Scouting Method: Mark off a 1-square-yard area where you suspect infestation. Drench the area with a solution of 2 fluid ounces of liquid dishwashing soap in 4 gallons of water. Insects will come to the surface for 5 or 10 minutes. If no insects are found, examine other suspected areas. This technique works best from late June to early September.

**Sod Webworms.** Look for brown areas in closely mowed areas. Damage may resemble symptoms of diseases such as dollar spot.

Scouting Method: Mark off 1 square yard in a location of suspected infestation. Drench the areas with a solution of 2 fluid ounces of liquid dishwashing soap in 4 gallons of water. Webworms will come to the turfgrass surface. Kneel to observe the area closely. Insects will return to the soil in 5 or 10 minutes. If no insects are found, examine other suspected areas.

**Sugarcane Beetles.** Although technically white grubs, sugarcane beetles cause damage to the turf through foliar feeding as adults and by tunneling in the soil, creating distinct ridges at the soil surface. Adults are active twice a year (May and September) and are recorded pests of bermudagrass, zoysiagrass, and tall fescue.

Scouting Method: Inspect managed turfgrass surrounding light sources. Adult beetles are attracted to lights at night and can be found tunneling at the base of light structures.



Green June beetle larva. (Photo by D. Reiland)



Green June beetle. (Photo by T. Bileisen)



Japanese beetle grubs. (Photo by B. Royals)

#### **Table 8. Some Organic Insect-Control Strategies**

Control Method and Products	Insects Targeted	Comments
Good management		Turf more tolerant of damage
Healthy, dense stand of turfgrass	ants, wasps, bees	Reduces ants, wasps, bees
Resistant varieties of turfgrass	chinch bugs	Limited varieties available
Endophyte-enhanced turfgrass	armyworms, cutworms, billbugs, chinch bugs, sod webworm	Only affects surface-feeding insects; available only in cool season turfgrasses (tall fescue, perennial ryegrass).
Bacillus thurigiensis (Bt) bacteria	armyworms, cutworms, sod webworm	Slow-acting, narrow spectrum of insects affected.
Bacillus popilliae (Milky spore) bacteria	white grubs (Japanese beetle)	Limited availability; benefits remain unclear
<i>Beauveria bassiana</i> (fungus); <i>Metarhizium anisopliae</i> (fungus)	chinch bugs, mole crickets, various caterpillars, white grubs	Naturally-occurring, limited commercial production; effectiveness not well-documented.
Clamshell pieces	armyworms, cutworms	Limited availability; benefits remain unclear.
Entomogenous nematodes ( <i>Steinernema carpocapsae, S. Glaseri, Heterorhabditis bacteriophora</i> )	armyworms, cutworms, billbugs, green June beetle grubs, white grubs, fleas, mole crickets, sod webworms	Numerous products for different pests; specific conditions must be met for successful use.
Insecticidal soaps and oils	armyworms, cutworms, sod webworms	Only soaps have a role in turfgrass; effective on some caterpillars.
Azadirachtin (neem seed extract)	armyworms, cutworms, sod webworms	Controls caterpillars; growth regulator; must be applied to small worms
Diatomaceous earth	armyworms, cutworms	Acts as a desiccant; effectiveness questionable in moist environment.
Traps	white grubs	Various products available for adult stages (e.g. Japanese Beetles). Have not been demonstrated to be effective for reducing subsequent larval infestations.
Minimize thatch	all pests	Reduces likelihood of an infestation; improves efficacy of control strategies.

## Diseases

Prevention is the best strategy for disease control in organic lawns. Disease occurs only when susceptible plants, pathogens (organisms that cause disease), and favorable environmental conditions are all present. Selecting turfgrass that is adapted to the region, preparing a well-drained, sunny site, and keeping the turfgrass healthy are the best strategies for preventing disease.

Even a well-adapted turfgrass can suffer from disease if the soil has not been adequately prepared. Most of the soils in North Carolina have a low pH and low phosphorus levels, especially if the area was wooded just before the lawn was planted.

Soil tests should be taken from the site early enough to find out how much lime and phosphorus should be incorporated before planting. The depth of incorporation of the lime and phosphorus determines the depth of rooting of the turfgrasses. A deep and healthy root system results in a healthy plant that can better tolerate environmental stresses, including disease.

Cool-season turfgrasses grow better in the fall, which allows them to fight off infection from fungal pathogens. Pathogens attack turfgrasses when they are under stress; thus, most cool-season turfgrasses are more susceptible during the summer months.

**Fertilization.** Some disease is likely to occur in all lawns at some time during the year, but a good fertilizer program can reduce the amount of damage. Fertilizer applications should be based on recommendations for the specific type of turfgrass and on soil test results. Correct timing of fertilizer applications is important. Rates of nitrogen that exceed 0.5 pound nitrogen in June, July, and August on tall fescue may increase the severity of brown patch and gray leaf spot. Tall fescue should be fertilized mostly in the fall and spring, but supplemental nitrogen fertilization during the summer will likely be necessary. Applications of nitrogen fertilizer will not increase brown patch severity on tall fescue if applied at less than 0.5 pound nitrogen per 1,000 square feet.

**Watering.** During dry weather, turfgrasses should generally be watered once each week with about 1 inch of water. Avoid frequent, light irrigations in the evening that extend leaf wetness and provide favorable conditions for development of disease.

**Mowing.** Maintaining the proper mowing height helps in controlling damage from disease. Most diseases will be less severe in taller turfgrass unless it results in increased canopy wetness. Also, turfgrasses should be mowed when the foliage is dry. Mowing when the turfgrass is wet can spread the disease-causing organisms from infected to healthy leaves more rapidly.



Brown patch on tall fescue.



Slime mold.



Powdery mildew.



Red "threads".



Leaf spot.

#### Table 9. Diseases of Cool-Season Turfgrasses.

Disease	Turfgrasses	Symptoms	Management Strategies
Brown Patch	Fescue Ryegrass Bluegrass	Circular brown patches up to 3 feet in diameter develop during hot, wet weather. Infected leaves become dark, wilt and die quickly when the disease is active. The whole patch eventually becomes brownish-tan.	Adjust soil pH to 6 to 6.5 and avoid nitrogen rates that exceed 0.5 lb of N in summer. Avoid prolonged leaf wetness by minimizing shade, watering early during the day, and providing good soil drainage. Water deeply but infrequently. Use of some organic fertilizers and composts may decrease disease severity.
Gray leaf spot	Tall fescue Ryegrass	Oval or circular spots with a gray to brown center surrounded by a purple to dark brown border. Patches start as straw colored areas 6 to 10 inches in diameter that can expand at an alarming rate.	Do not exceed nitrogen rates of 0.5 lb during June, July and August. Avoid light, frequent irrigation cycles during the summer months especially in the evening. Water deeply and infrequently to limit prolonged leaf wetness. Mowing slightly lower and collecting clippings can limit disease progress, but this disease is very destructive and most likely will require renovation if it develops.
Dollar Spot	Bluegrass Ryegrass	Straw-colored patches 2 to 6 inches in diameter usually develop under cool, cloudy conditions. Light tan lesions with reddish-brown margins develop on individual leaves. Use the most resistant cultivars available.	Adequate fertilization will help overcome the disease. Water deeply but infrequently and avoid late afternoon and evening watering. Collect and compost clippings when symptoms are present.
Fairy Rings	All	Large arcs or rings consisting of very green turfgrass, dead turfgrass, mushrooms, puffballs, or a combination of these.	Remove organic matter (stumps, waste lumber) from soil before planting. Power rake to remove thatch when it exceeds 0.5 inch. Remove soil cores, spike or force water into affected areas to allow nutrient and water penetration. Avoid over-fertilization in an attempt to mask the green ring. Rototilling and replanting may eliminate fairy rings.
Leaf Spot	All	Dark, circular or oval lesions on leaves and stems. Some lesions become red, purple or tan with dark margins. Turfgrass appears yellow and turns brown when the disease is severe, resulting in a thinning of the lawn.	Use resistant cultivars. Avoid close mowing in late spring and summer. Water deeply but infrequently and avoid prolonged leaf wetness.
Powdery Mildew	Bluegrass	White to gray powdery growth on infected leaves. Heavily infected leaves turn yellow and die. Symptoms are prevalent in shaded areas.	Plant shade tolerant cultivars. Improve light penetration and air movement by pruning, removal, or careful placement of trees and shrubs. Water deeply but infrequently and avoid prolonged leaf wetness. Raise mowing height.
Red Thread	All	Circular or irregular, bleached or reddish patches from 6 to 12 inches in diameter develop in cool- moist weather. Red threads radiate from the tips of dead leaves.	Fertilize lawn adequately to help overcome disease. Water deeply but infrequently. Collect and compost clippings when disease is present. Prune trees and nearby vegetation to improve air movement.
Rust	Fescue Bluegrass Ryegrass	Small yellow specks on leaves and stems develop into orange or red pustules. Heavily infected bluegrass and ryegrass lawns may have an orange or reddish hue. Heavily infected turf may become thin.	Plant resistant cultivars. Insure adequate fertilization and collect clippings when symptoms exist.
Slime Mold	All	White, gray, powdery fruiting bodies cover leaves in patches 6 to 12 inches in diameter during warm- wet weather.	Remove by brushing, mowing or washing the turf. Slime molds are not considered harmful.
Southern Blight	Bluegrass Ryegrass	Circular or crescent yellow-to-dead areas up to 3 feet in diameter. Tuft of green (frog-eye) in ring of dead turfgrass is common. Weeds such as clover are also killed in spots. Tiny tan-to-brown seed-like bodies are usually present at outer edge of ring.	Fertilize and irrigate lawn properly. Power rake to remove thatch when it exceeds 0.5 inch.

Source: Diseases of Cool Season Grasses, AG-36, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, 8/92.

#### Table 10. Diseases of Warm-Season Turfgrasses

Disease	Turfgrasses	Symptoms	Management Strategies
Large patch	Bermudagrass St.Augstinegrass Centipedegrass	Circular brown patches up to 20 feet in diameter develop during cool, wet weather in the spring or fall. Leaves wilt and die, resulting in large brownish-tan areas. Often present in bermudagrass at time of spring green-up.	Provide good drainage and avoid excessive nitrogen fertilization. The lawn usually recovers in warm, dry weather.
Dollar Spot	Centipedegrass Bermudagrass Zoysiagrass	Straw-colored patches 2 to 6 inches in diameter usually develop in late summer. Light tan lesions with reddish-brown margins develop across leaves.	Adequate fertilization will help the turfgrass overcome the disease. Irrigate lawn as needed to avoid drought stress.
Fairy Rings	All	Large arcs or rings consisting of very green grass, dead grass, mushrooms, puffballs, or a combination of these symptoms.	Remove organic matter (stumps, waste lumber) from soil before planting. Power rake to remove thatch when it exceeds 0.5 inch. Remove soil cores, spike or force water into affected areas to allow nutrient and water penetration. Avoid over-fertilization in an attempt to mask the green ring. Rototilling and replanting may eliminate fairy rings.
Gray Leaf Spot	St.Augstinegrass	Oval or circular tan lesions that are bordered by purple to brown margins develop in warm, wet weather. Leaves wither and die if many lesions develop, giving the lawn a brownish color.	Avoid excessive fertilization with nitrogen when warm, humid weather is expected. Avoid late afternoon and evening watering. Prune trees and undergrowth to improve air movement and light intensity.
Leaf Spot	Bermudagrass	Dark, circular or oval-shaped lesions on blades and stems. Some lesions become red, purple or tan with dark margins. Lawn appears yellow to brown if the disease is severe and turfgrass becomes thin.	Fertilize properly and avoid close mowing in late spring and summer. Keep mower blades sharp. Water deeply but infrequently and avoid prolonged leaf wetness.
Rust	Zoysiagrass	Small yellow specks on leaves and stems develop into orange or red pustules. Heavily infected lawns may have an orange or reddish hue and become thin and weak. Rust is most often a problem with lawns with too much shade.	Give adequate fertilizer and collect clippings when symptoms exist. Reduce shade and maintain good soil moisture.
Slime Mold	All	White, gray, powdery fruiting bodies cover leaves in patches 6 to 12 inches in diameter during warm, wet weather. Fungus usually disappears during dry weather.	Remove by brushing, mowing or washing the turf. Slime molds are not considered harmful.
Spring Dead Spot	Bermudagrass	Dead spots appear in the spring as turfgrass resumes growth, usually after lawn is at least three to five years old. Spots expand for three to four years, often developing into rings, and then disappear. Infected areas recover slowly, and weeds frequently invade these areas during the summer.	Avoid excessive nitrogen fertilization and do not apply nitrogen after late August. Raise mowing height and ensure adequate potassium in the fall. Reduce thatch by aerifying and pulverizing soil cores.
Nematodes (sting)	All	Lawn becomes thin and does not grow well following fertilization and irrigation. This occurs most often in sandy soils. Roots are shallow and may be killed. Have soil samples examined by the NCDA to determine if nematodes are a problem.	Plant the best-adapted turfgrasses and ensure adequate fertilization and irrigation to help overcome nematode damage.

Source: Diseases of Warm-Season Grasses, AG-360, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, 4/94.

Control Method	Product/Strategies	Comments
Cultural	Properly adapted species; proper site preparation,	(See individual disease for more specific information.)
	fertilization, irrigation, and mowing practices.	
Composts	Many available.	Some commercially available composts may be enhanced
	Municipal yard waste is available in some	with added microbial organisms as biocontrol agents.
	communities.	
Organic Fertilizers	Many available.	High organic content influences activity of both favorable
		and unfavorable microorganisms. Biocontrol is achieved
		through increased presence and activity of favorable agents.
Bacterial and Non-	Not widely commercially available.	Research has shown effective control of disease (brown
pathogenic Fungal		patch and Pythium in particular) is possible with non-
Control Agents		pathogenic organisms. Presently, practical applications lack
		consistency in performance.

## **Renovating an Established Lawn**

Lawn renovation refers to any procedure beyond normal maintenance required to upgrade an existing lawn. Renovation generally takes place on a small scale in isolated areas of the lawn. Bare spots larger than 4 inches in diameter should be replanted. Deterioration of the entire lawn may require re-establishment. A deteriorated lawn is often a symptom of some underlying problem. Some of the major causes of lawn deterioration include:

- planting a turfgrass that is poorly adapted to the site (this may even result from a gradual change, such as increased tree canopy)
- overwatering, overfertilizing, mowing too low
- poor drainage, heavy shade, compacted soil
- improper nutrient balance or low pH
- excessive thatch buildup

Before renovating, identify and correct the problems that may have caused the deterioration. Otherwise, renovation will be an ongoing process.

## **Soil Preparation**

To achieve good germination and fast establishment, remove weeds and prepare the soil before overseeding. Do a soil test in the area to be renovated and follow recommendations for nutrients and pH. If total renovation of an area is needed because of severe damage or takeover by weeds, cover the area with a black plastic sheet for 7 to 10 days to kill most plants, including weeds. Those not killed will have to be manually removed as they appear. In bare areas, loosen the top 4 to 6 inches of the soil with a rake, hoe, shovel, or roto-tiller. Fill in low areas and smooth the surface so clods are smaller than marbles. If the area is to be reseeded, add compost before tilling to enhance water retention and speed germination. It is also possible to renovate small areas by coring and reseeding.

- Remove as much extra vegetation as possible from the area to be overseeded. Use a rake to remove thatch, weeds, and leaves. (It is important to remove the roots of weeds too, to prevent the weed from regenerating and reappearing later.) Weeds with underground shoots are harder to control and may need to be tilled under. Making several passes with a power rake is usually the best choice for cleaning up large areas.
- 2. Apply a complete (N-P-K) fertilizer to the soil. In small areas, hand application is acceptable. In larger areas, use a rotary or drop-type spreader to insure uniform distribution.
- 3. Use a rake to loosen the soil between existing plants as much as possible. If the soil is very dry, moisten the soil to improve penetration by the rake. In large areas, use a core aerifier to bring the soil to the surface. After aerifying, let the plugs dry, then pulverize with a power rake or by dragging a chain-link fence.
- 4. See Table 3 for correct seeding rates. To insure uniform coverage of seed, use a rotary or drop-type spreader, applying half of the seed in one direction, and the other half at a right angle to the first pass.
- 5. Keep the overseeded areas moist by sprinkling lightly several times a day. As seedlings grow, water less often, but more deeply, to promote deep rooting.

## Timing

Late summer to early fall is the best time to renovate cool-season lawns. Seedlings can survive the heat and drought stresses of summer better if they can establish themselves the previous fall and winter. Warm-season lawns are best renovated in late spring to early summer. Attempts to upgrade existing lawns when conditions do not favor good growth are unlikely to succeed.

## Replanting

**Seeding** is recommended for turfgrasses with bunchtype or slowly spreading growth habits. These include tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass, ryegrass, bahiagrass, and fine fescue. See Table 3 for correct seeding rates. To ensure uniform coverage, use a rotary or drop-type spreader, applying half of the seed in one direction and the other half at a right angle to the first pass. Incorporate seed into the top one-eighth inch of the soil by lightly pulling a leaf rake over loosened soil or by running a vertical slicer over areas that have been aerified by coring. Adding a light covering of weed-free straw will help protect slopes from erosion and help retain heat and moisture.

**Plugging** can be used for those turfgrasses such as bermudagrass, zoysiagrass, St. Augustinegrass, and centipedegrass that spread laterally. Place plugs as close together as practical, considering the desired establishment speed. Use a plugging device to remove plugs of soil from bare areas and switch them with plugs collected from healthy areas.

**Broadcast Sprigging** large areas (15,000 square feet or more) is often reserved for bermudagrass. Rototill the recommended amount of fertilizer and lime as indicated by soil test results. Spread sprigs over the surface using rates provided in Table 3. Press the sprigs into the top 0.5 to 1 inch of soil. Roll the area to firm the soil and insure good sprig-to-soil contact.

## **Care after Planting**

Keep renovated areas moist with light sprinklings several times a day. As the seedlings, plugs, or sprigs grow, decrease the frequency of waterings while increasing the duration to promote deep rooting. After the third mowing, water to a depth of 6 inches.

Mow the areas as you normally would, using a sharp blade. Keep weeds pulled or cut very short until desirable turfgrasses have germinated, and the desired mowing height is achieved. This will reduce the competition for new seedlings.

To enhance establishment, fertilize the new seedlings of cool-season turfgrasses. A complete (N-P-K) fertilizer that provides about 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet should be applied approximately three weeks after seedlings emerge. An organic fertilizer, which will release nitrogen and other nutrients more slowly, needs to be applied at time of planting.

Warm-season turfgrasses can be fertilized every four weeks until turfgrass coverage is complete. Use a complete (N-P-K) form of fertilizer that provides about 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. Every two weeks, apply a nitrogen-only (N) fertilizer that provides about 0.5 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet may help warm-season turfgrasses fill in more quickly. Keep unnecessary traffic off the area until reestablished to prevent damage to the seedlings.

## **Overseeding Warm-Season Turfgrasses**

In bermudagrass lawns, overseeding with annual or perennial ryegrass will help to maintain a green color and protect the dormant warm-season turfgrass during the cooler months. Occasionally, zoysiagrass and centipedegrass are also overseeded, but it is generally not recommended. It is important that the warmseason turfgrass be healthy before overseeding so that it can withstand the rather harsh cultural practices and competition from cool-season turfgrass associated with overseeding.

**Timing.** Overseeding should take place in late fall, two or three weeks before the expected first frost or when the soil temperature drops below 75°F. In the piedmont, this is usually September 15 through October 15. Plan on one to two weeks earlier in the western part of the state, and one to two weeks later in the eastern part of the state.

The transition back to warm-season turf will begin in the spring when night air temperatures begin to reach 60°F, and the warm-season turfgrass begins to break dormancy. Regular maintenance practices for the warmseason turfgrass, competition from the warm-season turfgrass, warm temperatures, and disease should eventually force the overseeded species out of the lawn in the spring. However, overseeding for several consecutive years may result in gradual decline of the warm-season lawn and increase in the cool-season species. Therefore, it is important to establish a healthy warm-season lawn before considering overseeding.

- 1. Prepare for overseeding by closely mowing the warm-season turfgrass.
- Thin the turf, especially hybrid bermudagrass, with a power rake to improve seed placement near the soil. Centipedegrass and zoysiagrass are slow to recover from injury, so only lightly rake the surface on these lawns and remove the clippings.
- 3. Apply a complete format (N-P-K) fertilizer with a ratio of 1-2-2 based on 0.25 pound of nitrogen per 1000 square feet. Do not stimulate continued growth of the warm-season turfgrass by applying too much fertilizer or applying fertilizer too early. Use a rotary spreader when possible to insure uniform application.
- Choose a seed species. Annual and perennial ryegrasses are the major overseeding species. They are both quick to establish and relatively inexpensive. Newer varieties of perennial ryegrass are more heatand disease-tolerant.
- 5. Use a spreader to apply the seed at 5 to 10 pounds per 1000 square feet. Higher rates will produce denser and lusher lawns but will leave more plants to remove in the spring.
- 6. If possible, topdress the lawn with a light layer of sand or compost to improve seed-to-soil contact.
- 7. Water two to three times daily until the seedlings begin to emerge. Apply enough water to moisten the surface, but not enough to cause movement of the seed. As the seedlings emerge, water only once per day. Once the seedlings are established, water only when necessary to supplement rainfall.
- 8. Begin mowing two to three weeks after emergence. Do not remove more than one-third of the leaf blade in any one mowing. Maintain a mowing height of 1.5 to 3 inches.
- 9. Fertilize every four to six weeks with 0.5 pound of nitrogen.

- 10. In the spring, when night air temperatures are regularly above 60°F, mow the overseeded grass closely (1 to 1.5 inches) to reduce competition and promote growth of the warm-season turfgrass.
- 11. Do not fertilize until the warm-season turfgrass has returned to its green color.

## Summary

Remember that the key to successful organic lawn care is to prevent problems instead of to treat them after they appear. For success with your organic lawn, choose a sunny, well-drained site, and protect and prepare the soil following recommendations. Select a turfgrass that will grow well in your area and wear well for the uses intended, and then water, fertilize, mow on schedule, and inspect the lawn frequently to spot any problems early.

It is also important to remember that just because a product is labelled as organic or comes from a natural source does not mean that it poses no threat to the environment or to people, pets, and wildlife. To prevent water pollution from organic fertilizers, follow recommended rates for application and sweep fertilizers off paved surfaces. Nitrogen and nutrients from any source, organic or otherwise, should be kept out of streams and other waters.

Some organic pesticides are quite toxic and should be stored in a locked or secure place. If you use such products, always read and follow product labels. The "organic" products on the market change each year. No brand names are listed in this publication because new products become available each year and others are taken off the market or are not available in every location.

Consult your local N.C. Cooperative Extension center for current information.

## Appendix 1—Composting

Yard waste has been banned from public landfills in North Carolina since 1993. A beneficial and easy way to make use of yard waste is to turn it into compost. Typically, sources of compost include yard waste (turfgrass clippings, fallen leaves, wood chips), and animal manures. Composted materials are incorporated into soil to improve conditions for plant growth.

Wood chips and grass clippings can be also used, without composting, as mulch around the bases of trees and shrubbery or in landscape areas. Clippings from grass that has been treated with any pesticide should not be used as mulch because they could damage plants. Effective mulch will help retain moisture in the soil and help prevent erosion of bare soil. Do not mix materials that have not been composted into the topsoil before seeding a lawn and do not use fresh compost as a topdressing fertilizer for an established lawn. Fresh compost could kill grass and will tie up nitrogen in the soil.

## **Compost as Mulch and Fertilizer**

Properly cured compost may be used as a mulch or as an excellent source of organic matter for a lawn, whether incorporated in the topsoil before seeding or applied as a topdressing on an established lawn. To incorporate before seeding, use a rototiller or mix with the topsoil before spreading. One cubic yard of compost will cover approximately 108 square feet when applied to a depth of 3 inches, or 216 square feet at a depth of 2 inches, or 324 square feet at a depth of 1 inch. As a rule of thumb, spread compost no more than one third the depth of the rototiller. For instance, a 1-inch layer of compost should be tilled at 3-inches deep. Two or more passes with the tiller will help insure uniform distribution of compost and break up larger pieces of soil and compost.

To apply compost as a topdressing over a large area, use a rotary spreader if the compost materials will pass through the openings in the spreader. If the compost material is too large or irregular, spread the compost by raking out piles of compost placed evenly throughout the lawn. Apply no more compost than will cover half of the height of the turfgrass. Applying a thick layer of compost that covers the turfgrass will block sunlight and decrease growth. It may also interfere with mowing.

## **Benefits of Compost in Soil**

Rocks and sticks are often screened out of compost, and many weed seeds are killed by the high temperatures of the composting process. The consistency of compost is often very uniform so that it may be handled more easily than more inconsistent topsoils. A well-cured compost looks dark, crumbles in the hand, has uniform particles no larger than 1/2-inch in diameter, and has a pleasant odor.

Compost offers many advantages over topsoil. It has:

- higher nutrient content
- higher amount of organic matter
- better nutrient- and water-holding capacity
- neutral reaction
- disease-control potential

The nutrients held in organic compounds by dead plant matter are slowly made available as the organic matter decomposes. Once applied to the soil, properly cured compost releases these nutrients through further microbial activity and decomposition. The complex organic compounds in the compost provide structure to sandy or heavy clay soils.

In addition to the nutrients it provides, compost improves the ability of the soil to retain nutrients added through fertilization. Improved structure also increases water holding in sandy soils and water infiltration in heavy clay soils. High levels of organic matter increase microbial activity which helps to decrease thatch levels, release nutrients held in the soil, and control certain pathogens that cause disease in turfgrasses.

## **Other Compost Sources**

Yard waste is only one source for compost. It may, however, also be the most readily available source. Another good source is animal manure. Before using sources from outside your own yard, find out all you can about pH level, salinity levels, nutrient value, heavy metal content, and stability or maturity. Content of animal waste can be analyzed. High levels of acidity or salinity can cause severe problems in your lawn. High levels of unwanted nutrients or heavy metals can be harmful to the lawn or to the lawn owner. An unstable compost will not perform on the lawn as a mature compost will, so further curing may be necessary before application to an established lawn.

When used as a soil conditioner or in place of topsoil, properly cured compost is better than high quality topsoil.

## **Other Soil Conditioners**

Do not overlook the benefits of earthworms. They aerate and fertilize the soil and destroy thatch.

Other non-chemical products are available as soil conditioners. These products can be used to improve the soil's physical or biological characteristics or both. Humate, diatomaceous earth, calcined clay, and greensand are examples of soil conditioners. (Products affecting primarily the chemical properties of the soil are considered as fertilizers in this publication). These products vary greatly between brands, and their effects have not all been evaluated scientifically. Before using any of these products, find out about their pH level, salinity level, nutrient value, heavy metal content, and organic stability. Also, some may contain chemical additives or may have been chemically altered so that they do not fit the definition of "organic" used here.

#### How to Make Compost

- 7. Place excess grass clippings, pulled weeds, fallen leaves, vegetable scraps—basically anything that was growing—in a pile. The pile should be no less than 3 feet × 3 feet × 3 feet and no more than 5 feet × 5 feet × 5 feet. Meat scraps, bones, fatty foods, and pet feces should not be composted. Place the pile in a convenient but inconspicuous place. Use a wooden or wire fence, plastic tarp, or compost bin to contain the pile, if necessary.
- 8. Try to maintain equal amounts of green and brown materials (grass clippings and dead leaves) by mixing the materials within the pile. Adding materials in layers is acceptable but will result in compost that cures more slowly. Too much nitrogen (too many grass clippings) will cause fast but incomplete decomposition. Too little nitrogen (too many fallen leaves) will cause very slow decomposition.
- 9. Chopping or breaking the pieces into small pieces will increase the rate of compost maturity. Larger, less uniform materials will require more time to decompose.
- 10. Allow the pile to stand for several days. Temperatures inside the pile should gradually increase to 130°F to 150°F. As the temperature increases, microbial activity increases, breaking down the organic materials. Temperatures get high enough to kill many disease-causing organisms and weed seeds. The hotter the pile, the faster the composting.
- 11. Maintain an adequate amount of moisture in the pile. The materials in the pile should remain about as damp as a wrung-out sponge. Add water if it is too dry or cover the pile if it is too moist.
- 12. Maintain an adequate amount of air in the pile. Mix in larger materials like stems and leaves with fine materials like grass clippings to insure enough air movement in the pile.
- 13. For faster composts: Check the temperature regularly. When the heat decreases substantially (after 5 to 10 days), turn the pile, mixing it so that the outer edges are placed closer to the center where the most microbial activity takes place. This should be repeated to insure a homogenous compost, free of weed seed and plant pathogens. After four to eight weeks, depending on environmental conditions, the compost should be ready for use in the lawn.
- 14. For slower composts: As yard waste is collected, add it to the compost pile. Layering different wastes will improve uniformity and chopping or shredding will further enhance uniformity and rate of decomposition. Adding materials to an existing compost pile will extend the composting time to six months to two years for complete maturation of the original composted materials.

## **Appendix 2—Calibrating Spreaders**

Rotary spreaders cover a wider area faster than drop spreaders, require less effort to push, and have better ground clearance. Drop spreaders have more uniform patterns, lower drift potential, and a more precise control of pattern edges than rotary spreaders. They are preferred for smaller, more contained areas of turf.

Calibrate the spreader under conditions similar to those of the actual operation. Ground speed, rate, and pattern settings, operator, wind speed and direction, terrain, temperature, humidity, and product applied should all be similar to the expected application. Different spreaders, even from the same manufacturer, should be calibrated individually. Variations in characteristics of the impeller (paddle or spinner) such as diameter, speed (gear ratio), concavity (flat or concave), height above ground, fin shape, angle, and surface will affect the calibration.

Calibrate the spreader individually for different products. Characteristics of the product to be applied, such as particle shape, size, uniformity, density, critical relative humidity (the level of humidity at which the particle becomes sticky), and surface friction all affect distribution.

Different operators require individual calibrations. The walking speed, handle height, and pattern of travel are controlled by the operator.

Wind speed and direction, surface slope, temperature and relative humidity affect distribution. When conditions interfere with application of the product in a uniform manner, it is a good idea to delay application.

(Note: All collection pans used to calibrate a spreader must be the same size. Square pans 1 to 2 square feet, and 2 to 4 inches deep are recommended. To prevent material from bouncing out of the pans, place pads or baffles inside them).

## How to Calibrate a Rotary Spreader

- 1. Place collection pans in a line perpendicular to the travel direction of the spreader. Use at least 10 pans to cover the full width of the pattern. Large spreaders may need 20 to 30 pans.
- 2. Make several passes in the same direction over the pans. Make sure the spreader is open before reaching the pans and remember to walk at the same speed each time.
- 3. Collect and weigh the material in each pan on an accurate scale.
- 4. A desirable pattern is one that places the highest amount of material in the center and evenly decreasing amounts towards each side of the pattern. Unlike the drop spreader, some overlap of the pattern will be required to achieve a uniform distribution of the material. It is often recommended that the distance between spreader passes be adjusted so that the material is thrown back as far as the wheel marks from the last spreader pass. It is important that equal amounts of material be applied to the left and right side of the spreader. Skewing of the spreader to one side may be corrected by repositioning the pattern adjustment control if the spreader has one or restricting the discharge ports.
- 5. The width of turf covered by each pass of the spreader is determined by finding the trays on the left and right that are equal to one-half of the amount in the center tray.
- 6. Use the weight of material collected from the pan in the center in the equation below:

Weight of material per 1000 sq ft =  $1000 \times \frac{\text{weight of material in center tray}}{\text{area of pan } \times \text{ number of pans}} \times \text{ number of passes}$ 

7. If the proper rate is not achieved, change the spreader setting or the number of passes. Repeat the process until the spreader is applying the material at the proper rate.

## How to Calibrate a Drop Spreader

#### **Pan Method**

Push the spreader over a line of identical pans and collect and weigh the material. Measure the area of an individual pan and then use the following formula to determine the application rate:

Weight of material per 1000 sq ft =  $1000 \times \frac{\text{weight of material collected}}{\text{area of pan } \times \text{ number of}}$ pans  $\times$  number of passes

#### Sweep and Weigh Method

Push the spreader over a clean, smooth surface of a known distance and collect the material. Determine the application rate through the following formula:

Weight of material per 1000 sq ft =  $1000 \times \frac{\text{weight of material collected}}{\text{spreader width } \times \text{distance}}$ 

#### **Catch-Pan Method**

Attach a catch pan to the bottom of the drop spreader. Establish a known distance. Push the spreader over the known distance, opening the hopper at the starting point and closing at the finish point. The application rate is determined with the formula:

Weight of material per 1000 sq ft =  $1000 \times \frac{\text{weight of material collected}}{\text{spreader width } \times \text{distance}}$ 

Whatever method is used, make enough passes or travel enough distance so that enough material is collected to be weighed accurately. Change the opening in the spreader to adjust the rate. Repeat the calibration until the correct rate is achieved.

## **Spreader Operation**

- 1. Make sure the lever is closed before filling the hopper of the spreader.
- 2. Make sure the screen filter is in place to prevent clogging.
- 3. Push the spreader, do not pull.
- 4. Start walking and reach the calibrated speed before opening the lever to release the material; close the lever before slowing, turning, or stopping.
- 5. Hold the handle at the same height used in calibration. The impeller should be level.
- 6. Walk in straight lines. Use reference points such as spreader wheel marks or footprints.
- 7. Do not spread while turning. Generally, only one wheel drives the impeller. Continuing to spread while turning will cause the impeller to change speed, altering the distribution pattern.
- 8. Keep material dry to prevent caking and clogging of the spreader ports.

## **Spreader Maintenance**

- 1. Wash the spreader after each day's use to avoid buildup around ports and on the impeller. Water is adequate for cleaning water-soluble products. Dry completely to prevent rusting.
- 2. Store the spreader empty, in a cool, dry place.
- 3. Lubricate as specified by the owner's manual.



College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

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