

Early Spring Lawn Tips from RCW Nurseries

Core Aeration Gets To The Root Of Hard Soil

Lawn quality is measured in terms of color, density and uniformity. Soil conditions, cultural practices, and watering are the factors that affect lawn quality.

By mid-March winter is over, the grass is just coming out of its dormancy. You're planning to help it green up by applying fertilizer. It's entirely possible that the grass will be unable to take up the nutrients provided by the fertilizer due to poor soil conditions. Is the soil beneath your grass hard and lumpy? Does water run off after the grass has been irrigated? Does it always seem "thirsty", i.e. wilts by the next summer's day? Does it look hungry, i.e. not as green as it should be. If so, then your lawn is a prime candidate for core aeration.

Core aeration is performed with a special machine that pulls out plugs of soil. This opens up the soil structure, allowing air, water and fertilizer nutrients to penetrate more deeply reaching the grass roots. Core aeration makes the soil more friable, "crumbly", a condition allowing roots to grow down rather than up. When roots are growing up this is thatch. Friable soil also helps earthworms, nature's core aerators, to better able tunnel through the lawn, moving more nutrients and water. Plus the casings they leave behind are excellent fertilizers.

Mid-March through April is a good time to do this as the soil is usually softer from our spring rains, making it easier to core aerate. Whether you perform the core aeration, or hire a company for the job, make sure the machine being used has the appropriate length tines and spacing. Soil scientists and turfgrass experts recommend tines are a minimum of 4-inches in length, with a spacing of 2- to 3-inches. If the tines on the machine are farther apart, it will need to go over the same area multiple times.

First, make sure to mark off sprinkler heads - you don't want to run the machine over them. Not only will that damage them, it will also damage the machine's tines making it useless. Core aerate the lawn. The cores then can be either left to degrade naturally, or be broken up a day or two afterwards by simply mowing over them. Apply an organic lawn fertilizer at 2 - 3 times the recommended rate. The reason for choosing an organic fertilizer is that compacted soils are not only nutrient poor, they structurally weak, which is why they became compacted in the first place. Organic fertilizers contain materials that help build up soil structure. Because organic fertilizers have high amounts of insoluble nitrogen, this amount will last longer, allowing you to skip that mid-summer feeding in July if you so choose. Once this has been done, water the lawn thoroughly to help move both the soil and fertilizer into the holes. The holes will eventually fill in, completely disappearing within month.

Do not aerate your lawn by sticking sharp objects into the soil that do not remove a core. These only push soil aside to create a hole. In other words, they actually compact the soil even more. So wearing spikes on your shoes while mowing or walking on the grass is not a good technique.

Reducing "humps" in the lawn by rolling over them with a heavy roller only smashes the plants and compacts the soil. If you have a lumpy lawn, raise the surrounding low areas by spreading no more than 1/2-inch of topsoil mixed with compost, or humus. Do not use straight topsoil as it is too heavy.

Lawn Fertilization

Timing and refraining from over fertilizing a lawn is the second key to lawn quality. A heavy application of fertilizer causes an over abundance of grass to mow, weakening it and making it susceptible to disease (Take-All Patch and Brown Patch), and insects (chinch bugs, sod web worms). We have seen recommendations to apply commercial lawn fertilizers in mid-late February. We disagree and here's why.

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St. Augustine and Bermuda grass are heat loving plants, and will readily grow when both the soil and air temperatures are to their liking. Next, commercial lawn fertilizers contain a high amount of soluble nitrogen. They readily dissolve in water making the nitrogen immediately available. So if you feed the grass too early, the grass can't take it up and the fertilizer washes down the sewer. With soluble fertilizers you have to apply them more often during the growing season. Not a good use of your money.

There are excellent slow release products, but using them before the St. Augustine and Bermuda grass are actively growing is wasting money. Again, they should only be applied when environmental conditions are to the grasses liking. This means that when the days and nights are consistently warm. You can easily see this because the grass will be actively growing, and needing to be mowed weekly.

Organic fertilizers can be applied earlier, because they contain high amounts of insoluble nitrogen. This means that it dissolves slowly in water, and stays in the soil longer. Beneficial soil micro-organisms break down the nitrogen into a form the grass can use. But again, you do not want to apply these too early either, because the grass is not ready to take up the nitrogen contained in them.

Last, but not least, moderately or heavily shaded areas should be fertilized lightly. Grass growing in the shade is more succulent and has a weaker root system than grass growing in full sun. Applying too much fertilizer will not make it grow more thickly in those areas, it will just keep weakening it. A practical resolution is to plant those areas with shady loving plants such as Ardesia, Ferns, Dwarf Mondo Grass, Variegated Lirope, Impatiens, Torenia, Shrimp Plant, Australian Violet, Pigeonberry and others.

Keep Your Sprinkler Timer Up to Date

Adjust the timer on your sprinkler system to better control the amount and frequency of watering your lawn. Start the watering cycle very early in the morning, well before the 6 a.m. rush to work. Morning watering should be completed by 9 a.m. allowing leaves to be dried by the day's breezes before being touched by the full rays of the afternoon sun. If you prefer to water later in the day, do so between 6 p.m. and sunset. After sunset, the breezes subside and the leaves are moist all night long -- making them ideal incubators for fungal infection.

As the temperature increases and we receive less rain adjust the sprinkler system to run through several cycles of watering instead of one long period. For example, if your sunny front lawn needs to be watered for 30 minutes and your shady side yard needs to be watered for 20 minutes, set the timer to run through 2 cycles of watering. The first cycle waters the sunny yard for 15 minutes and shady side yard for 10 minutes. By the time the second cycle of watering has started the soil has absorbed the applied water.

We hope these tips help you get your lawn off to a good start. We appreciate your patronage and support and look forward to helping you with your gardening needs.