

# 123 Basics of Growing Grass

If you are new to lawn care or if you are having trouble maintaining a dense turf, please consider these three elements of lawn care: water, mowing, and fertilizing. If you follow the suggestions here you should have a nice turf and relatively few weeds.

## Water - the secret to life



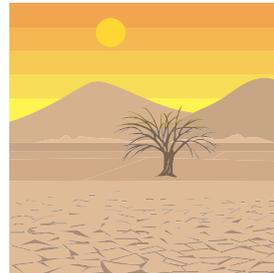
Grass needs enough water on a regular basis for it to survive and thrive. If you are seeing occasional dry spots, thinning, grass blades folding together, or color change to bluish and then tan (but not yellowing), then you probably need to water more deeply or possibly more often.

Unless you always get one inch of rain per week (always), then you cannot rely on rain to provide enough water. You will need to have a hose and sprinkler or in-ground system to provide water.

### How much water do you need to apply?

The answer to that depends on...

- **The climate** - if you live in a rainy area receiving 50 inches per year of rain, you may not have to irrigate but if you live in the dry desert, you will probably have to provide all the water for your lawn.



- **The season** - during the summer grass needs more water than in the winter.



- **The soil** - sandy soil drains faster and needs more frequent watering than if the soil had some clay and organic matter in it.

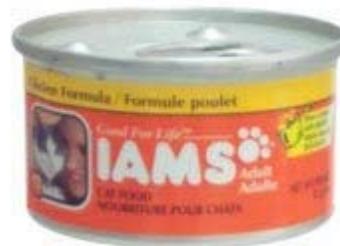


- **The type of grass** - only to a minimal degree does the type of grass matter regarding watering. It is often said that bermuda and buffalo grass need less water than other grasses. What this means is that other grasses may die or thin out considerably during a drought but bermuda and buffalo grass will go dormant. It is important to understand that if you want the grass to look nice, you will need to water regularly.



**How to measure your watering**

If you want to apply about one inch of water, set some tuna or cat food cans in the yard and turn on your sprinkler(s). Time how long it takes to fill the cans and use that time for your watering. When you first start you should keep an eye on your grass every day to see if it starts to go dry. If it does, immediately water again but water longer than the previous time. Eventually you should work your way up to watering only once per week during the hottest part of summer. If you live in Las Vegas you will probably have to water more often.



**Finally, the secret to watering**

The real secret to watering your established lawn is to water infrequently (about once per week) but deeply (one inch or more). Deep infrequent watering puts water deep in the soil where the roots can reach for it. Deep water does not evaporate from the soil so the deep roots will be moist for much longer. It also allows the surface of the soil to dry out which prevents new seeds (weeds) from sprouting. Thus by simply watering correctly, you will help to prevent weeds in your lawn.



When you water you should apply it all at once and not spread out over the week. If your soil does not absorb the water quickly when you irrigate, do not let it run off. Stop watering as soon as you see it running off. Let the water soak in for 10 to 15 minutes and resume watering.

The soil is like a sponge; when it first gets wet the water will run off. Once the water soaks in, more and more water will soak in.

## Mowing

There are several purposes to mowing.

- to clean up the shaggy tops of the turf (and still leave plenty of leaf surfaces to absorb sunlight)
- remove weed and weed seeds (many weeds cannot stand to be mowed at all and will die)
- provide shade to the soil keeping it cool

There are two types of grass to deal with.

Most grasses do best when mowed as tall as you and your spouse can stand it. The tallest setting on a rotary type mower is usually good. The grasses that do well mowed tall include the fescues, Kentucky bluegrass, St Augustine, rye, and some zoysias.



Cool season grass mix mowed tall

There are; however, grasses that will put on much more leaf surface when mowed extremely short. Bermuda, bentgrass, centipede, and some zoysias are in that category. When these grasses are mowed shorter than 1 inch high, they begin to form a different growth habit. Their leaves become very short but they put on many more leaves than when they are left tall. The result is a very dense mat growing low against the surface of the soil. The best lawn mower for these grasses is a reel type mower.



Standing ON bermuda grass

With either type of mower, you can save money on fertilizing by “mulch mowing,” where you do not collect the grass clippings. Leave the small fragments of grass on the lawn to decompose. If you have piles of grass when you mow, you waited too long. Just mow over the piles again until they are disbursed into the turf.



Reel type mower



Rotary type mower (no grass collection bag)

## **Fertilizing**

The purpose of fertilizing is to make the grass healthier and greener. How that happens is not in the scope of this basic discussion. If you use chemical fertilizers like Scott's Turf Builder and others, you need to follow their instructions for application. If you apply too much you could burn your grass. It is better to apply too little than to apply more than is recommended. If you use an organic fertilizer you don't need to be as careful.

### **When to fertilize**

A good starting schedule for fertilizing is to apply on the major USA national holidays. The national holidays are usually easy to remember. Here is an example

- Memorial Day (or late in May) -
  - (chemical) 1 pound of N per 1,000 square feet or
  - (organic) 10-20 pounds per 1,000 square feet
- 4th of July -
  - (chemical) NEVER use chemical fertilizer in the summer
  - (organic) 10-20 pounds per 1,000 square feet
- Labor Day (or early in September) -
  - (chemical) 1 pound of N per 1,000 square feet or
  - (organic) 10-20 pounds per 1,000 square feet
- Thanksgiving (or late in November) -
  - (chemical) 1 pound of N per 1,000 square feet or
  - (organic) 10-20 pounds per 1,000 square feet

If you live in the warmer climate you can start on Washington's Birthday (or mid February). As with watering, you should watch your grass for signs of yellowing. Yellowing usually means the fertilizer is depleted and it is time to fertilize again. If you make it to the next holiday on the schedule without any yellowing, you might be using too much fertilizer, but you are probably okay.