Natural Lawn Care

By Doug Kinnaman

Why Go Natural?

- Lawns are a great place to play, but we sometimes waste a lot of water, use pesticides and fertilizers that pollute our streams and lakes, and produce a lot of waste in caring for lawns. Fortunately, there's a better way!
- Follow these steps for a healthier lawn that needs less water and no chemicals, recycles clippings into free fertilizer, and protects our environment and your family's health.

Mixing the Natural Lawn Care ingredients

What's it supposed to look like?

Mow higher (1-2 inches), mow regularly, and leave the clippings

- **“Grasscycling”** - Or leaving the clippings on the lawn doesn’t cause thatch build up. But it does make lawns healthier. Soil organisms recycle the clippings into free fertilizer, and you save all the work of bagging. Modern mulching lawn mowers make grasscycling even easier.

- **You can grasscycle with any mower** - Push mowers and conventional power mowers leave clippings on the surface to break down. Electric and gas mulching mowers blow chopped clippings down to the soil, leaving a clean lawn. Consumer Reports rates mulching mowers each June.

Use “natural organic” or “slow release” fertilizers

- Don’t try for a deep blue-green color – it’s a sign of over-fertilizing. Healthy lawns in our region are a lighter meadow green.
- Buy “natural organic” or “slow release” fertilizers, or use compost to feed your lawn slowly, and reduce fertilizer pollution of our streams and lakes.
- The best time to fertilize is September, when grass plants are building root reserves for the next year.
- If you want to fertilize in spring, wait until May, when grass growth slows. Get a soil test if you suspect deficiencies.
- Many lawns will benefit from spreading lime every 1-2 years.
- Remember, grasscycling returns free fertilizer (the clippings) each time you mow, so you can fertilize less, or never.

Water deeply, to moisten the whole root zone, but less frequently

- Let the soil dry between waterings to prevent lawn disease and save water. Lawns only need about one inch of water a week in summer, including rain, to stay green. Or you can let areas of lawn that don't get heavy wear go brown and dormant – just water once a month, and they'll bounce back in the fall.
- **How much is one inch of water a week?** - Scatter tuna cans or other straight-sided containers on your lawn, turn on the sprinkler, and check the time. When most cans have 1 inch of water in them, turn off the sprinkler and check how long it ran. Now you know how long to run your sprinkler each week in summer, if you want to keep your lawn green.

Use automatic irrigation systems efficiently

- Automatic systems can actually waste lots of water, or be fairly efficient, depending on how you set and maintain them.
- Have a professional test, repair, and adjust your system annually.
- Inspect the system while operating once a month – look for leaks or heads that are plugged or misdirected.
- Install a rain shutoff device (ask your irrigation expert where to find them).
- Adjust the watering schedule at least once a month through the season – plants need a lot less water in May and September than they do in July and August.

Improve poor lawns with aeration, overseeding, and top-dressing with compost

- Aerate in spring or fall to improve root development and water penetration.
- Follow by overseeding thin areas with Northwest-adapted grass seed blends.
- Then “top-dress” by raking in 1/4 to 1/2 inch of compost to cover the seed and improve the soil.
- Repeat these steps annually as needed to improve poor lawns.

Danger/Caution

Warning, don't try this at home

Think twice before using “weed and feed” or other pesticides

- Accept a few weeds, and crowd out problem weeds by growing a dense healthy lawn. Use a long handled weed puller to easily remove dandelions without bending over. Weeding is easiest when the soil is moist. If you want to use weed killer, don’t spread “weed and feed” all over (it gets into our streams) – just spot spray the problem weeds.

Consider alternatives to lawns on steep slopes, shady areas, or near streams and lakes

- Grass grows best on level, well-drained soil in full sun or part shade. And it takes a lot of work (and sometimes chemicals) to maintain. Look for other plants better suited to soggy soil, slopes, or heavy shade. Try to leave or plant a “buffer” of dense, native vegetation along streams and lakes. It will filter and slow runoff, shade and cool the water, provide homes for wildlife, and prevent bank erosion too.

Natural yard care

5 steps to a healthy yard

Build Healthy Soil with Compost and Mulch

Healthy plants grow in healthy soil, growing deeper roots in soil that holds more water and nutrients. So building your soil with organic materials like compost and mulch is the best way to save water, recycle yard waste, reduce runoff, and save work in your lawn and garden.

Growing Healthy Soil

- Soil is alive! Billions of soil organisms create soil structure that allows air, water, and plant roots into the soil, while recycling nutrients, storing water, and protecting plants from disease. Those organisms live on organic matter such as dead leaves, mulch, and compost.

Feed your soil with compost

- Dig or rototill compost into the soil before planting.
- Lawns: mix 1-2 inches of compost 6 inches into the soil.
- Gardens: mix 2-3 inches of compost 8-12 inches deep.
- Use less on clay soils, more on sandy soils.
- Amend the whole bed, not just planting holes.
- On existing gardens add 1 inch every year or two.

Mulch your plantings

- Mulch is any organic material spread on the surface to conserve water, control weeds, and slowly feed the soil. Different mulches work better for different plants:
- Flower beds and vegetable gardens: spread 1-3 inches of fall leaves, compost, grass clippings, or straw. Keep mulch at least an inch away from plant stems.
- Trees, shrubs, and perennials: spread 2-4 inches of woody mulches, like wood chips (often available from tree services, or in bags or bulk from garden stores) or if chips aren't available, coarse bark (fine bark can plug the soil). Fall leaves also work well to prevent winter weeds and soil erosion.
- Lawns: mulch mow (leave the clippings). On lawns in poor condition, aerate and then rake in ½ inch of compost in spring or fall.

Use less fertilizer – go organic

- Chemical fertilizers can pollute our waterways and damage soil and plant health. The best start for all plants is to amend the soil with compost before planting.
- Trees, shrubs, and most perennials get all the nutrients they need from healthy soil, and regular mulching with organic matter like compost, leaves, or wood chips.
- If lawns are yellow or thin, apply a “natural organic” or “slow release” fertilizer” once a year in September, and top-dress with compost.
- Vegetables may need an organic fertilizer and mineral supplements as well as compost.
- Vegetable gardens and lawns may need lime every few years, which supplies calcium and makes other nutrients more available by changing the pH – for lime types, timing, and use recommendations, consult your local turf farm or Garden Center.

Who talked me into this organic stuff.

Is it worth it?

Reality check – get a soil test

- Using too much or the wrong fertilizer damages plants, your soil, and our streams. Call the Conservation District to diagnose plant problems, pick the right fertilizer, and to find out how to get an inexpensive soil test that will tell you what's really in your soil, and what your lawn or garden needs. Free soil testing is available through the Thurston County Conservation District.

Where to buy compost and mulch?

- Cedar Grove composts yard and food waste, and sells compost in bags or bulk directly and through local nurseries and garden stores. Call a Garden Center supplier near you.
- Fall leaves make a great free mulch. Arborist wood chips are often free from tree services. Cedar Grove and other suppliers sell wood chip mulch in bulk, or it's available in bags at garden stores. A local Landscape Supply company or Garden Center can help with other mulch ideas.

Choosing the Right Plants for Your Site

- You can save water, reduce the need for chemicals, and grow a beautiful easy-care yard by following these steps.

Do you think I have found the right plant?

It’s got deeps root, grows tall, what do you think?

Get to know your yard

- Where is it sunny or shady at different seasons? Dig in a few places to see where your soil is sand or clay, soggy year ‘round or bone dry. Look around – are there plants with problems? Where do you want play areas, vegetables, color, views, or privacy? How much lawn do you need, or want to maintain? What kind of plantings would fit your yard?

Choose the right plant for the right place

- Select plants that grow well in the Northwest and match the sun, soil, and water available in your yard.
- Considering edible plants?
- Think about how big a tree or shrub will be when mature (especially next to houses or under powerlines).
- Look around at neighbors' yards, nurseries, and demonstration gardens for plants that do well in sites similar to yours. (See the publications and links below for more ideas.)

Pick plants that resist pests and use less water

- Many pest and disease resistant varieties are available now – ask at nurseries or call a local Garden Center. Choose plants that are “low water use” or “drought tolerant.” After they’re established (2-5 years), many will thrive just on our limited summer rainfall most years, saving you time and money on watering.

Group plants by their needs

- Put plants that need full sun, or shade, or certain soil conditions, or frequent irrigation together with those with similar needs. That way you don't have to water the whole yard to reach one thirsty plant!

Lawns and vegetables are picky!

- They need several hours of full sun, level well-drained soil, and irrigation. Limit lawn areas to where you need them. Other plants are better for shade, soggy sites, or slopes, and require less maintenance.

Give plants a good start

- Prepare the soil by mixing 20-25% compost into soil in planting beds. (For trees and shrubs, mix compost into the whole planting bed, or just plant in native soil and mulch well. Don't add compost just to their planting holes – that can limit root growth.)
- Then spread out the roots, add water, and tamp soil back in for good root contact. Set plants so the soil level is at the same height on the stem as at the nursery, to prevent problems.
- Mulch new plantings well, and be sure to water even drought tolerant plants during their first few summers, until they build deep roots.

Make space for wildlife

- You can invite birds, butterflies, and other wildlife into your yard, protect shorelines and salmon, and make a more attractive landscape. Plant trees and use native plants, especially ones with fruit and flowers. Plant in layers (ground cover, shrubs, and trees). Avoid using pesticides – they can poison birds, beneficial insects, and salmon when rain washes them through storm drains into streams. Leave wild “buffer” areas of native plants along ravines, streams and shorelines.

Did I capture the right type of wildlife

All you need is a good net and some luck, right?

Smart Watering

- Watering too much causes many common plant problems. You can grow healthier, deeper-rooted plants, save money on water bills, and conserve precious water by learning to give your lawn and garden just what they need, and no more.

Water deeply, but infrequently

- Most plants do best if the soil is allowed to partially dry out between waterings. For lawns, a loss of shine or footprints showing indicate that it's time to water. Vegetables and other annuals should be watered at the first sign of wilting, but tougher perennials (plants that live several years) only need water if they stay droopy after it cools off in the evening. Trees and shrubs usually don't need any watering once their roots are fully established (two to five years), except in very dry years.

Moisten the whole root zone

- Watering deeply builds deeper, healthier root systems. To see if you are watering deep enough to moisten the whole root zone, dig in with a trowel an hour after watering to check the depth.

Make every drop count

- Some easy ways to lower water bills and get more water to plants include:
- Mix compost into your soil, and spread mulch on top of soil to hold more water and prevent evaporation.
- Choose low water use plants. Once established they can often thrive just on rainfall.
- Use soaker hoses or drip irrigation on beds – they save 50% or more compared with sprinklers!
- Use a timer that screws onto the faucet (available at garden stores) to water just the right amount.
- Water lawns separately from other plantings. Make sure sprinklers aren't watering the pavement too.
- When soil is dry or compacted it won't absorb water quickly. If water puddles, stop watering for a while and then restart, so the water has time to soak in.
- Water in the early morning or evening – if you water at mid-day, half of the water just evaporates.

Use automatic irrigation systems efficiently

- Automatic systems often waste a lot of water, or they can be fairly efficient depending on how you set and maintain them.
- Have a professional test, repair, and adjust your system annually.
- Inspect the system while operating once a month – look for leaks or heads that are plugged or misdirected.
- Install a rain shutoff device (ask your irrigation expert where to find them).
- Adjust the watering schedule at least once a month through the season – plants need a lot less water in May and September than they do in July and August.

Natural Pest, Weed and Disease Control

- **Think twice before using pesticides**
- Pesticides (weed and bug killers) can damage soil and plant health, poison wildlife like birds and salmon, and harm our families health. The good news is that we really don't need those chemicals to grow a healthy, attractive landscape. Try these natural methods.

Start with prevention

- Build healthy soil with compost and mulch – soil organisms protect plants from many disease and insect pest problems.
- Select pest-resistant plants, and put them in the sun/shade and soil conditions they like.
- Clean up diseased plants, and compost dead plants in fall to reduce hiding places for insect pests.
- Pull weeds before they go to seed and spread.
- Use a variety of plants, so if pests attack one plant, others can fill its place.

Identify the problem before you spray, squash, or stomp

- The problem could really be incorrect mowing or pruning, improper watering, or other easily corrected practices. Or that scary bug could actually be a beneficial “good bug” that eats problem pests. Whether it’s a bug, disease, or weed, you need to identify it to know how to effectively manage it.

Accept a little damage – give nature time to work

- Natural predators often bring pests under control, but they need time to work. Most bugs are good bugs: only about 5% of the bugs in your yard are pests. “Good bugs” like ground beetles, lady bugs, and lacewings help control pests. Don’t spray at the first sign of damage – nature may control it for you, or plants often just outgrow the damage.

If a pest or weed problem develops, use the least toxic solution

- Physical controls like traps, barriers, fabric row covers, or repellants may work for pests.
- Long handled weed pullers pop dandelions out easily.
- Mulching once a year reduces weeds in beds.
- Less toxic products like soaps, horticultural oils, and plant-based insecticides that work for many problems are now available – see Grow Smart Grow Safe below.
- Beneficial insects that prey on problem bugs are available for sale, or you can attract these “good bugs” by planting a variety of plants that provide pollen and nectar all year.

I think I found the toxic goo

This won’t be a problem will it?

Use chemical pesticides as the last resort

- If you must use a chemical pesticide, use the least toxic product, and spot apply it – don't spread it all over the yard to kill a few weeds or bugs. It may be best to have a professional who has all the protective gear do the application, but don't use services that spread chemicals over the whole yard or spray on a calendar schedule. You want to apply pesticides only when and where you really have a problem. Follow label instructions exactly – more is not better. And be sure to keep children and pets out of application areas.

Replace problem plants with pest-resistant ones

- If a plant, even a tree, has insect pest or disease problems every year, it's time to replace it with a more pest-resistant, site-adapted variety or another type of plant that doesn't have these problems.

Questions?

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