Master Gardener Foundation
Grays Harbor & Pacific Counties, Washington

Pest Corner

March, 2006

Dethatching Lawns

When more than ½ inch of thatch accumulates at the soil surface of your lawn, it may be time to dethatch. Thatch prevents proper penetration of air, water, and plant nutrients. Many different machines are available at the rental center for thatch removal.

Spring is the best time to remove large amounts of thatch because the turf is able to fill in rapidly in order to prevent weed invasion. In addition, turfgrasses are partially dormant at this time of the year and suffer the least amount of injury. If only light thatch removal is required, you can dethatch any time of the year.

Normal thatch removal will not injure the lawn severely enough to necessitate reseeding. If properly dethatched, grasses recover quickly and exhibit their normal beauty when conditions are suitable for growth.

If deep thatch layers are to be removed, do not try to do it in a single pass, but make repeated passes in different directions. Lower the thatch machine approximately ¼ inch on each pass. Remove loosened material before changing direction. When done, mow immediately at the recommended mowing height. It may be necessary to re-seed the lawn after heavy thatching.

If thatch becomes unmanageable (more than 2 inches deep), it is best to remove all grass with a power sod cutter, cultivate the soil, and re-seed with desirable grasses.

Lawn Moss

Lawn mosses are common throughout the Twin Harbor Counties and Western Washington. Moss growth normally starts with fall rains and reaches a peak in early spring. Because grasses grow poorly in winter, mosses are able to invade and often dominate lawns in only a few months. Moss growth declines in summer as conditions become drier and turfgrass growth increases. Under shady irrigated conditions, moss may grow through summer. Moss can tolerate long periods of drought in a dehydrated condition and re-hydrate and grow with the onset of fall rains. The persistent and recurring nature of lawn mosses is largely due to our mild temperatures and the wet-dry nature of our climate.

Moss can be a problem year-round. Two ways to combat moss is by applying nitrogen or moss fertilizer to your lawn. After one application, most lawns aren't bothered with moss until early winter.

Moss can be physically removed by de-thatching in early spring. Optimum timing is mid-March through April when moss is still healthy and vigorous. With a flail type de-thatcher, as much as 75 percent of the moss can be physically removed. Dethatching should be followed by nitrogen fertilization to stimulate turf growth and increase density. Where moss is severe, chemical sprays applied after the de-thatching operation will enhance control.

Weed Infested Lawns

If your existing lawn is infested with shallow rooted weeds, strip off all of the existing sod and put it in the compost heap. Then thoroughly rototill the soil, smooth it out and re-seed. However, if your lawn has deeply rooted perennial weeds like dandelions, a better approach would be to first spray the existing turf with a non-selective herbicide like Round-up (glysophate) and then wait until the weeds and grass are completely dead before beginning sod removal.

Lawn Fertilizing

WSU Turfgrass specialists suggest you wait until about April 15th to make your first spring fertilizer application. In Western Washington, where deficiencies of phosphorus and potassium are common, WSU recommends fertilizers with a 3-1-2 ratio. Examples of a 3-1-2 ratio are: 21-7-14, 15-5-10, 12-4-8 etc.

Providing that you have no major nutrient deficiencies, high quality turf can be obtained by applying 4 pounds of nitrogen per 1000 square feet per year. Divide this amount of nitrogen into four equal applications to provide the season total. A suggested schedule is April 15th, June 15th, September 1st, and November 15th. This amount of nitrogen can be easily supplied by using Ammonium Sulfate (21-0-0) at the rate of 5 pounds per 1000 square feet. Applying this amount of fertilizer at the times specified above in most cases will provide a very vigorous and healthy lawn which resists weed invasion.