

5. Lawns

A well-kept lawn enhances any garden and sets off plants beautifully. Regular maintenance is essential to ensure it stays healthy and always looks its best.

Annual Schedule

Early Spring
<p>Keep off lawn if frosted or very wet.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply lawn sand instead of lawn feed if moss is present. • Carry out restoration work.
Late Spring
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mow weekly. Adjust mower to summer cut height. • Apply spring fertiliser • Lightly scarify • Apply pesticide if necessary • Treat weeds • Brush away worm casts
Summer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mow 1 - 3 times a week. • Water during dry periods • Apply summer fertiliser • Apply weed-killer • Trim lawn edges after mowing • Spike areas subject to heavy wear and tear
Autumn
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise height of cut as growth slows • Water if dry • Apply autumn fertiliser • Scarify and aerate lawn or remove thatch with tined rake • Apply weed-killer • Treat moss with lawn sand • Apply pesticide or fungicide if required • Top dress after autumn maintenance • Remove fallen leaves
Winter
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lightly mow if there is new growth • Remove leaves

Further Information

Mowing

Mowing not only keeps a lawn neat, but it also stimulates the growth of lateral offshoots that will lead to dense, healthy and even growth.

Follow a few simple rules:

- Mow little and often and do not remove more than one third of grass growth per mow, as grass struggles to recover from erratic and drastic mowing.
- The first cut in spring should be a light trim with the blades on the highest setting.
- Mow more often with lower blades during summer when grass growth is fastest. Mow at least one a week.
- Avoid mowing during the hottest part of the day in the summer, as the tips of cut grass are vulnerable to scorch.
- For the average lawn, maintain a grass height of between 1 and 2.5 cm. This is sufficient to protect the surface from the general wear and tear.
- Reduce the frequency of mowing in autumn and winter.
- Avoid mowing during a drought, or set the mower to a higher cut. Grass will cope with drought better if it is longer and isn't under pressure to grow to feed itself.
- Avoid mowing during very wet conditions, as wet grass clogs up the mower or remains in clumps on the grass.
- Avoid mowing during frosty weather, as this damages the grass.
- For a curved or irregular shaped lawn, begin by mowing around the edge and then mow straight up and down the centre.
- Remove clippings from lawns, as they may damage grass as they rot down. Some weeds may also root from cut stems
- Clear away fallen leaves because a layer of leaves leads to the development of moss or lawn diseases.

Lawn Edges

Neat lawn edges increase the visual appeal of the garden by defining the lawn edge and borders.

As grass grows it spreads out horizontally so lawn edges need a trim after each mow. Use long-handled edging shears or a strimmer. Redefine lawn edges at least twice a year using a half-moon-shaped edger.

Fertiliser

Grass is no different to any other plant and will need feeding to keep it healthy. For most lawns an application of fertiliser in spring and again in autumn is sufficient. In summary:

- A spring fertiliser is higher in nitrogen. They often contain both fast and slow release nitrogen, which will green up a lawn within a few days and keep it green for weeks.
- An autumn feed contains more phosphorous to encourage root growth. It contains less nitrogen so soft, vulnerable green growth will be limited.

- Lawn sand contains iron which can be applied to control moss. Iron can also be present in combined weed and feed formulations that are designed to target both moss and broad-leaved weeds. A side effect of iron is that it darkens the grass, which is useful in autumn when the grass begins to lose its colour.
- Soluble summer lawn tonics are also available that are high in fast release nitrogen. The results are quick, but short lived.

Applying fertiliser

Apply a spring fertiliser at the beginning of the growing season in spring. If using a powder or granular formulation, wait until the grass is dry and soil is moist so that the fertiliser settles on the soil. Apply an autumn fertiliser after routine maintenance work such as scarification.

It is essential to apply a fertiliser evenly. Patchy applications will lead to very obvious variations in growth and an overdose may also damage the grass, resulting in bare patches. Applications can be done manually, but on large lawns it will be much easier to use a 'drop spreader'. Move up and down the lawn as if mowing, but make sure each pass meets, but does not overlap the previous one.

Watering

During a prolonged dry period, grass will turn brown and appear to be dead, but it is pretty hardy stuff and has simply become dormant. A lawn will often green up again once the rains come back in autumn. A good maintenance programme will help a lawn to **cope with water shortages** better.

It is vital to keep all new lawns watered well to enable them to establish.

Aerating and Scarifying

After a few years, the soil beneath a lawn is likely to become compacted from frequent use. Compaction causes air spaces to be pushed out and inhibits root growth. It is vital to regularly spike, or **aerate**, a lawn to create airways to encourage deep root growth and a healthy lawn. On small lawns, a garden fork or hollow-tined spiker will suffice. Angle the fork or spiker back slightly to raise the turf a little, thus creating more opportunities for root growth.

Scarifying is the removal of the straw-like remains of dead plants and lawn cuttings (known as thatch) that accumulates on the surface of the soil at the base of the lawn. The most obvious sign of thatch build-up is when the lawn feels springy underfoot. A layer of thatch greater than 1cm can prevent water and air from infiltrating the lawn and reaching the grass roots. A build-up of surface water may also encourage the development of moss. If the lawn is small, scarifying may be practically carried out using a spring-tined rake. For larger lawns, a mechanical scarifier or lawn rake is advisable.

Aerate and scarify in spring, or preferably autumn, when weather conditions are cool and moist, as this will allow the grass to recover quicker from the stress. Mow the lawn before scarifying, because if the grass is too long it may be ripped out by the roots. To maximise thatch removal, scarify in two perpendicular directions.

If moss is present, treat first to prevent spread. After aerating and scarifying, apply a gritty top dressing (3 parts topsoil, 6 parts horticultural sand and 1 part peat substitute) to add nutrients, maintain pore spaces, improve drainage and keep the surface level.

Leaves and Wormcasts

Leaves should be removed. A layer of leaves can prevent a lawn from photosynthesising and can lead to the development of moss or lawn diseases.

Worms are beneficial visitors to the garden. Worms are a sign of healthy soil, but worm casts on a lawn are unattractive, impede mowing and often contain weed seeds brought up from below the ground. On a dry day, disperse using a rake or brush.

Lawn Weeds

Weeds are more likely to settle in neglected lawns, as they are fast-growing, invasive and grow opportunistically where grass coverage is poor or weak. Moss is a common problem where the soil is compacted, the drainage is poor, nutrient levels are low or there is insufficient light. Moss can also be present as a result of mowing too closely, or where there are extremes of soil PH. Occasionally, moss will build up on a healthy lawn if the winter has been particularly wet. **The simplest way of preventing weeds is to provide optimum growing conditions for the grass by applying an annual maintenance programme.** Grass will outgrow the majority of weeds if it is healthy and mown regularly.

Annuals are unlikely to take hold in a lawn if it is mown regularly as they are unable to set seed. Before mowing, use a fan-shaped rake to lift annuals and low-spreading weeds and put them in the path of the blades.

However, there are various **perennials** that can be a nuisance in lawns. Perennial weeds often have storage organs such as tap roots, or rhizomes, that enable them to survive year to year and broad-leaved and rosette weeds lay close to the ground so are able to survive even in regularly mown grass. However, many perennial weeds simply survive in lawns because of poor cultivation techniques:

- The presence of weeds normally indicates that the lawn is not growing vigorously enough to prevent weeds from establishing. This is usually through a lack of nutrients or drought.
- Soil compaction and mowing too closely often leads to moss.
- Weed seeds are often present in worm casts. Brush them off the lawn on a dry day.
- Perennial weeds can be spread by the action of mowing. The mown bits of root can produce many new plants.

Lawn weeds can be treated by hand or by applying broad-leaved weedkillers. Scattered weeds such as daisy, dandelion and plantains can be practically removed by hand. Weeds with tap roots can be killed by cutting the root around 8 cm below surface level.

The best time to apply a chemical weedkiller is late spring, when the weeds are growing vigorously. The weedkiller works by entering the weed via the leaves and killing it from the inside. They are effective against broad-leaved and rosette weeds, but the grass is unaffected. Weedkillers are available in a variety of formats including concentrated liquids, soluble powders, sprays or combined weed and feed formulas. Apply a weedkiller when the lawn (and weeds) are growing well. Apply two or three days after mowing to give weeds a chance to grow enough to absorb the weedkiller. Do not mow again for two or three days. Avoid applying chemicals to a new lawn.

Some lawn weeds, such as daises or speedwell, can be killed after one or two applications. Others,

such as trefoils, may need two or three applications. Persistent weeds should be removed by hand, reseeding or returfing if necessary.

!!! Do not compost grass cuttings from the first few cuts following an application of weedkiller !!!

Moss

First cut the lawn to expose patches of moss. Apply a moss killer such as lawn sand, a liquid formulation such as sulphate of iron, or a combined weed and feed. Wait until it turns brown and then rake it out. Treat any recovering patches within three weeks.

Toadstools

Toadstools often appear on lawns because of an increase in organic matter, generated from activities such as fertilising, weed killing and scarifying. Many do not harm the grass and are, in fact, beneficial, as they convert organic matter into nutrients that will feed the lawn. Although they can look alarming, they can easily be picked off.