



Texas Agricultural Extension Service

The Texas A&M University System
Department of Soil and Crop Sciences

Keys to Keeping Your Lawn Healthy Now ... and Later

by **James A. McAfee**

Associate Professor and Turfgrass Specialist (Dallas)

Neil Sperry's Gardens

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The last thing you probably want to think about in the dead of winter is lawn maintenance. While your turfgrass may be dormant, it's still living plant material that requires care. Here are some tips to remember in managing your lawn this month and in the seasons ahead.

Watering

If turfgrass becomes too dry in its dormant stage, it can and will die. In fact, more Texas turf is lost during winter to desiccation (complete dryness) than to freeze damage. Be sure to water your lawn at least once every four or five weeks during winter if there hasn't been enough rain or snow. A dry lawn is likely to be damaged more by low temperatures than a well-watered lawn.

As the lawn starts to break dormancy and green up in late winter and early spring, it's critical to keep it well watered. Turfgrass is composed of plants that generate new roots, stems and leaves during this transitional time.

Weed Control

An abundance of winter weeds can delay your turf's spring transition. When the weeds finally die, your lawn is likely to be thin and highly susceptible to the next invasion of undesirable plants such as crabgrass.

The most effective means of controlling most annual winter weeds is to apply a preemergent herbicide. However, it must be applied in early fall in order to be effective, so mark your calendar for a fall '97 treatment. It's also too late to apply a preemergent herbicide for weeds that have already germinated in your lawn.

Here's what you can do this time of year to combat winter weeds:

- For broadleaf weeds, use a postemergent herbicide intended for broadleaf weeds. It will only be effective when applied at temperatures above 55 F.
- For grassy weeds and broadleaf weeds, use Roundup, but only if the lawn is totally dormant. Roundup can injure or kill turfgrass if it's applied to green tissue.
- A new product, Scythe, will control winter annual weeds. The active ingredient is a fatty acid. If your lawn is not totally dormant, Scythe might cause some leaf tissue to burn, but it shouldn't cause serious damage to the turf.

Fertilization

It's not time yet to fertilize warm-season turfgrasses such as bermudagrass, St. Augustinegrass, buffalograss and zoysia. However, this month is a good time to apply a balanced fertilizer to lawns that contain tall fescue, or warm-season lawns that were overseeded with ryegrass for winter color. Apply approximately 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet in late January to early February.

The best time to fertilize warm-season turfgrasses is after they've broken dormancy and begun to grow. They do not, however, need an application of fertilizer to help them break that dormancy. Soil temperature, air temperature and daylength are all factors in determining spring green-up.

Planning a Great Lawn for '97

Use your spare time now to design your 1997 lawn maintenance program. Here are the top considerations in developing a schedule:

■ **Weed Control.** Late February to late March is the ideal time to apply a preemergent herbicide for summer annual weeds such as crabgrass. If you applied a preemergent herbicide last spring and still had weeds, then ask yourself: (1) Was the herbicide watered in thoroughly? (2) Was the lawn mowed or scalped before the herbicide was watered in thoroughly? (3) Was the herbicide applied at the correct rate? If the herbicide you used last year didn't seem to work, you may need to try a different one this spring.

■ **Fertilization.** Wait until the turf has broken dormancy and started growing. Depending on your location in Texas, this will occur around late March to early April. For best results, use a fertilizer containing some slow-release nitrogen. Do not overfertilize your lawn. Too much fertilizer will generate excessive top growth and not enough root growth. Over-fertilization will also increase the turf's need for additional water.

■ **Soil Compaction.** If your lawn has a problem with soil compaction, you may need to aerify it in late spring or early summer. Plants can't obtain the oxygen they need for healthy growth if they're in compacted soils.

■ **Problem Areas.** If portions of your lawn did poorly or died in 1996, try and determine the cause of the problem. Common causes are too much shade, compacted soils and desiccation (dryness).

■ **Mowing.** Just as your lawn begins to green up and grow, mow it as low as possible. This is also known as "scalping". (It's not necessary to scalp a buffalograss lawn). Scalping the lawn will encourage a much faster spring transition. Then, as growth progresses, set your mower at the proper height for spring growth.

■ **Don't bag It.** After you've scalped the lawn, use the shredded grass for mulch or composting.

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