Your Complete Lawn Care Guide

Shrekfeet

Independent Lawn Professionals

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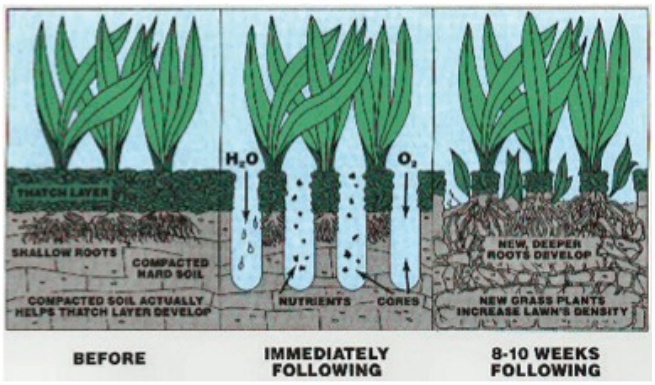
Looking after your lawn

The grass isn't always greener on the other side of the fence – or so we are told. However, sometimes not only is it greener, but it's also free from weeds and moss. It might even be neatly mown with tidy edges and impressive stripes, the envy of the neighbours, a beautiful, quintessentially British lawn to be proud of. So what is that neighbour with the perfect lawn doing differently and how could you achieve a lovely lawn to complement your home? A place to relax throughout the summer, which your family can enjoy and your friends will admire. No more bald patches, dead moss and daisies. Not that there's anything wrong with daises of course – just not in the lawn!

To start with you need to understand a little about grass. It's not rocket-science, but it is plant-science. Plants, like most living organisms, need three main things to survive; energy, water, and nutrition. You might think that water would be readily available for your lawn most of the year. However, compaction issues and waterlogged ground mean fewer spaces in the soil for water and air to reach the roots – a big problem if you're hoping to achieve a healthy lawn. Compaction can be reduced, drainage and air circulation can also be improved. It can be hard work but your lawn will respond well.



Look closely at the surface of your lawn, at the spaces between the grass plants. What do you see? Most probably you'll find a build-up of moss, dead leaves and other plant matter, which is referred to as thatch.

This layer above the soil can cause major lawn issues. Like compaction, it prevents air and water reaching the roots. It also provides ideal conditions for some rather nasty lawn pests which like nothing better than eating the roots of grass. To make it worse, these pests are welcome food for birds, badgers and foxes which dig up the surface to get to the food. Prompt action is required to reduce moss and

thatch before the lawn is ruined. If you want to know more, search the Internet for images of chafer grub damage. This is a very real problem, so act fast to reduce thatch before secondary damage occurs, because if it does, it's a major problem to correct.

Next we come to nutrition. If you remember anything from biology you may recall that plants need sunlight to synthesise nutrients, using water and air. To do this they also need green leaves. What are we doing regularly with lawns? Mowing them and reducing the amount of green leaves, reducing the ability the grass has to feed itself.

In nature leaves fall to the ground, decompose and help feed the plant above. With lawns we typically remove the cut grass, thus further reducing the potential for the grass to feed itself. Grass plants have differing nutritional requirements depending on the time of year. Poor nutrition results in weak plants which are more vulnerable to disease, more likely to die back leaving space for weeds to take hold. Too much of the wrong nutrition can also cause problems. Getting the balance right is challenging, but when you do your lawn will respond beautifully. A qualified lawn care professional can help.

So let's come back to mowing. Many people mow their own lawns and see no point in paying a professional to carry out what seems like one of the easiest garden tasks. However, many people get mowing wrong. The frequency of mowing is important. Too often, and the grass has no time to recover. Not often enough, and the grass leaves get too long, cutting away too much and stressing the plant. Cutting at the wrong height also encourages moss growth. Height of cut is almost as important as frequency, and grass should be cut at different heights at different times of year, depending on temperature and weather.

Finally a brief word about weed control. A healthy, well-fed and correctly mown lawn, with the right drainage and growing conditions, provides little opportunity for weeds to take hold. Life's too busy to try to do everything yourself. A lawn care professional can help you create the right environment, correct any existing problems and maintain the perfect growing conditions. Perhaps then you will be on the greenest side of the fence.

Ian Kenyon sits on the committee of the UK Lawncare Association and owns Shrekfeet Lawn. He is always happy to offer friendly, professional advice and help 01962 460146, 07739 789483 www.shrekfeet.com. Read on for specific information about caring for your lawn.

Microbial Activity

Healthy plants require healthy soil, but what does that really mean? Let's look at soil fungi and bacteria and how they help your lawn.

Healthy soil contains a complex mix of nutrients, moisture, insect life and also decaying plant-life and animals. Their balance is essential and their interdependent relationship makes soil healthy and productive. If their balance is upset soil productivity is at risk, as is the health of your lawn. There are many things we can do to promote soil health. If you give your soil the right support the benefits are huge.

Physics

Physics are typically the digging, aerating and attention put into 'working' the soil. This is often about introducing air spaces into the soil. Air is of course an essential element of life and should make up 25% of your soil composition. Water should make up a further 25% and the physical working of the soil relieves compaction and aids drainage. Waterlogging push air out of the soil causing biological death - seriously impacting your grass plants.

Chemistry

When lawns are affected by predatory pests, disease or weeds the addition of chemical treatments have often been the go-to approach to control these problems. As we begin to recognise the importance of reducing our chemical input, we look towards other ways of managing these issues. A healthy lawn, on healthy soil, with a great biological balance requires less chemical intervention.

Biology

Understanding the relationship between plants above the ground, their roots below, the bacteria and fungi living within the soil and the animal life that share this soil with them helps you understand why soil biology is important. Green leaf plants use energy from the sun, water and air to photosynthesise. This is how plants create the food they need in the form of carbohydrates - sugars. Plants only use some of this food and the rest is excreted from roots into the soil. Soil bacteria are attracted to the simple carbohydrate released by the plants. They use this as a food source. As they break this down, they release nitrogen. Nitrogen makes up the major component of plant nutrition and is essential for the growth of green leaves.

The Bacterial Barrier

There are many organisms living within the soil. Not all of them are good. The bacteria within the soil that is feeding from the excreted carbohydrate has a vested interest in ensuring the plant stays alive. It works hard to protect the plant from attack. Boosting levels of carbohydrate within the soil will encourage higher populations of beneficial bacteria. Our specialised summer nutrition contains many different beneficial elements, one of which is based on molasses, a sugary substance very high in carbohydrate.

Bacteria and Salt

Nitrogen for lawn feed comes in many forms. Different forms of nitrogen contain different levels of salt – lawn care professionals call this the salt index. Cheaper forms of nitrogen have a higher salt index. Many of the lawn fertilisers available off-the-shelf have cheaper ingredients and higher salt index. Professional lawn care providers would typically look to use lawn fertilisers that have a low salt index. There's a really important reason for this. Salt kills bacteria. Think about why we use salt to cure meat, that's to stop it from rotting – being broken down by bacteria. If we add high levels of salt to our lawn soil it will damage the essential bacteria within it. Promoting good bacterial growth within your soil reduces the need to add soil nutrition.

Fungi

Fungi are brilliant at breaking down woody substances and plant matter. The fleshy toadstools that you find above ground are actually the fruiting heads that carry the fungal spores – basically the seeds that create new fungi. What you see above ground is connected to a massive network of the fungi within the soil. If you have toadstools on the surface of your lawn it's often a sign that you have good, healthy, functional soil. When you find mould growing on your food that's basically fungi breaking down the carbon in the food – remembering that salt would stop this process and preserve the food. Fungi doesn't like salt. I'm unsure how salt feels about fungi! Like their relationship with bacteria, plants create a mutually beneficial relationship with the fungi in the soil and because of the fungal network, plants can then benefit from far greater access to nutrients and moisture within the soil. This can create an area up to 1,000 times greater than that of the plant roots themselves. So, by increasing the population of beneficial fungi within your lawn soil, we can reduce the need to add water and food.

The Fungal Barrier

There is a plethora of fungi that can cause major lawn issues. These attack the grass plants when conditions are right and by the time you notice their impact it's often too late to take action. Prevention is better than cure. Previously, regular applications of fungicide were used to defend grass against attack. However, these may also have an impact on beneficial fungi and their use should be avoided. Defending against attack is by far the best strategy and this is where beneficial fungi are important. When you watch the growth of fungi under a microscope you can observe something spectacular. As two fungi sense each other their growth stops. Beneficial fungi around the roots of a plant create a virtual 'force-field' which protects them from attack.

Support your Soil

Our recommendations are simple. Mulch mow if possible. Mulch mowing leaves the clippings behind and this then returns decaying plant life back to the soil and feeds fungi. Minimise the use of chemicals and fungicides. Use low salt index fertilisers so as not to damage microbial life. Water regularly and to a good depth. Dry soil reduces microbial populations. Aerate the lawn at least once a year to ensure there is plenty of air for the microbes. Our professional approach to lawn nutrition ensures we add what's necessary to support this complex network of relationships. We take an 'organic where possible' approach. We recommend the addition of carbon through lawn dressing as it feeds fungi and the compost element of the dressing contains plenty of soil bacteria which can then multiply within the soil. We also add carbohydrate in our summer liquid feed. This feeds the bacteria and the bacteria helps feed and protect the grass.

Lawn mowing made easy – or at least a little easier!

One man may have gone to mow a meadow, how many men (or ladies) might be going to mow their own meadow this weekend? And how many of them might be doing more harm than they think?

Lawn mowing is one of those garden tasks that many people think they can do themselves. Some get it right and do a wonderful job; others are regularly getting it wrong. Perhaps you'd be surprised to learn how much harm you can do to your lawn by not getting the basics right.

By now you might be wondering; just what it is that you need to know before mowing your lawn?
When it comes to lawn mowing there are really three main considerations; height, direction of cut and frequency. We'll look at each of them in turn.

Mowing height is a fine balance between keeping the grass tidy and looking superb, along with allowing the grass to have enough leaf to photosynthesise and remain healthy. Plants use the green pigment in their leaves, along with sunlight, to synthesise nutrients from carbon dioxide and water. Remove too much leaf and you are reducing the ability of the grass plants in your lawn to create food. Weakening the grasses and allowing diseases to take hold. The grass dies back leaving bald areas where weed seeds can settle, germinate and spoil the appearance of your lawn.

By all means mow your lawn short, but don't do it suddenly. Only ever reduce the mowing height gradually over time. If you want to mow short then ensure growing conditions are right. Warm but not too hot. Moist, but not too much rain. And of course, adequate fertiliser. Speak to a lawn care professional to ensure your lawn is receiving the treatments it needs to keep it healthy before you reduce its chances of feeding itself.

Ideally you should be varying the cut height throughout the growing season. Starting high as grass growth slowly begins. Lowering as the season warms up and growth is more vigorous. Raising the height again in the dry hot weeks of summer and then lowering again with lush autumn growth. Finally you want to be going into winter with longer grass, better able to survive the bad weather.

Humans are by nature creatures of habit. Think about your day and the things you do regularly, the same way each time. We get ready for bed in the same order or drive to work the same route. It makes things easier for us as we don't have to think about the mundane stuff. We just do it. Most people are the same with their lawn mowing. Rarely do they vary their approach or direction of mow. They start at point A and finish at point B.

As you mow your lawn the weight of the mower and the forward motion pushes the grass leaves in the direction you are mowing. Over time the grass begins to lean over this way making it harder to get a clean cut. Varying the direction of mow helps to promote healthy grass growth and makes for a more attractive lawn. It also reduces the chance of ruts forming from the wheels of the mower pressing into the turf. Go a little crazy. Mix things up a bit.

Now to look at mowing frequency; let's face it, we are all busy people. Most of us work hard all week and often hard on the weekend too. Speak to those lucky enough to be retired and they usually tell you they've never been busier. When we are busy or tired there is a tendency not to get everything done on time. The problem with mowing is that the grass just keeps on growing. Miss a mow and it's longer than ever.

As the grass plants grow taller the stems of the plants extended into your cutting area. When you do finally catch up you are inevitably taking off too much. Cutting into the stem of the grass plant shocks the plant. Making it less able to recover from the mow and more susceptible to diseases. Plus the lawn looks scalped and untidy.

Mowing can feel like a never-ending job and grass growth can be unforgiving. Lawn care professionals have access to growth suppressants. Applied to your lawn they reduce growing height and encourage more compact, dense growth. They also encourage root growth, creating a more drought tolerant lawn. Speak to a lawn care professional to find out more.

Mowing is a Marmite kind of job; those that love it really love it and those that don't thoroughly hate it. After all, if you work hard all week, or if you are at a stage in life where hard work is behind you, then maybe there is something else you'd rather be doing than mowing the lawn. Create some you-time and leave your lawn care to the professionals. You might be surprised by how affordable a professional lawn care plan is and I'm certain you'll be impressed by the professional results.

Lawn care - moss and Scarification

According to Don McLean's 70's classic, American Pie, 'moss grows fat on a rolling stone'. According to my experience, moss grows fat on a winter lawn. Many suffer moss growth in their lawns. It's easy to spot, lush and green amongst the grass. Thriving as it smothers its less vigorous winter bed partner. The good news is it responds well to treatment and can be brought under control with specialist lawn-care. The bad news is, left untreated it will thrive and it encourages infestation from chafer grubs which can cause a huge amount of lawn damage.

From a distance moss gives the impression of a green, lush lawn. The grass it is smothering struggles to survive, the percentage of moss in the lawn increases and the grass gradually dies away.

Why is this a problem?

Wait until the drier summer months and you'll soon see. Moss thrives in wet conditions, but unlike healthy, well maintained grass, which is far hardier, moss dries out and dies in dry, warm summer weather. At the height of summer, when you want to be enjoying your garden at its best, you are left with brown, scorched areas of lawn and areas of dead moss. Most unsightly and far too late in the season to treat. Spring is the ideal time for dealing with moss issues.

Mowing too short, too infrequently or not following the correct mowing height for the time of year can be a big contributor to moss growth. As can incorrect nutrition, not dealing with thatch or compaction and not removing leaves from the lawn regularly. Bare areas should also be dealt with promptly so as not to leave space for moss spores to germinate. A healthy dense grass sward leaves little room for moss or weeds to take up residence.

Killing and removing moss

If you already have moss in your lawn this can be treated. Some people try this themselves with lawn-sand but the results can be hit and miss with the grass often being killed at the same time as the moss. Our approach is a liquid treatment combined with a wetting agent that helps penetrate deep into the thick matting of moss. Ensure your lawn has the correct nutritional plan in place, so it's receiving the right nutrients at the right time of year. Healthy grass, like healthy people, is in a better position to fight off invaders.

Once the moss has been killed it's time to remove it. This can be hard work over a large area where a petrol-driven scarifier is essential equipment for the job. It's time consuming and pretty hard work but it's important to get the dead moss out and will reduce thatch at the same time. Scarification vigorously rakes the surface of the lawn with spinning blades. These blades rip out moss and thatch and open up the surface of the lawn.

Top-dressing

It's often beneficial to top-dress your lawn after scarification. This addition of a special mixture of sand and sifted soil helps to level uneven hollows in the lawn surface, improves soil structure, drainage and helps the general health of the lawn.

Over-seeding to infill

The final process is over-seeding - introducing new, healthy grass plants to in-fill the gaps left by the moss that's been removed, creating a stronger, healthier lawn that's more capable of dealing with the challenges nature throws at it.

Scarification creates ideal surface conditions for over-seeding. Unlike re-seeding, where the existing vegetation is removed completely and a new seed-bed created for the sowing of a new lawn, over-seeding works with what you already have by adding new grass seeds to your existing lawn and helping to blend areas of weak growth into other areas of your lawn more naturally. It's also far less labour intensive, uses fewer lawn seeds and is much more economical. It is however really important to deal with any weeds before seeding begins. New grass plants are susceptible to the treatments used to kill lawn weeds. Older, existing lawn grasses are robust enough to withstand these treatments. Therefore manage the weed issue first and then get new grass plants growing. Remember that once germination begins your new grass seeds need moisture to survive. They won't be able to manage times without water until they have established roots. If it doesn't rain then you need to remember to keep them watered for the first few weeks but regular rain is almost guaranteed at this time of year.

Planning ahead is the way to create superb outdoor spaces you can enjoy all year. Spring is the time to treat lawn moss problems, if you don't want to do this yourself call in the professionals and get on top of that moss problem before it's too late.

Lawns are hungry feeders; let's take a look at what they need to remain healthy throughout the year

Tom Jones may well have sung about the green green grass of home, but far too few gardeners really understand what goes into the perfect lawn nutrition. Most think it is okay to pick up a bag of feed from the garden centre, sprinkle it liberally on the lawn and all will be okay. Sometimes this works fine, however your lawn has a complex relationship with nutrition, which changes throughout the growing season and these things need to be taken into consideration if you want a healthy, attractive, disease free lawn.

You may be thinking that surely it can't be that complicated. Let's try to explain the basics. When it comes to lawn nutrition there are really three main things to think about; fertiliser composition, timing and application methods.

Fertilisation is important as it influences the colour of your lawn, its ability to cope with the stresses of drought, mowing and extremes of temperature. It also helps to fight against disease and weed infiltration. Choosing the right fertiliser and applying it correctly really is the key to success.

Both chemical and organic fertilisers display the nutrient content on the packaging by way of three different numbers. These three numbers represent the compounds Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Potassium (or Potash). Often they will be displayed as N-P-K. The numbers on the pack correspond to the percentage of each of these compounds in the fertiliser inside the pack. That's the easy bit! What each of these compounds does for the plant is probably the most important part. However, when to apply it is important too.

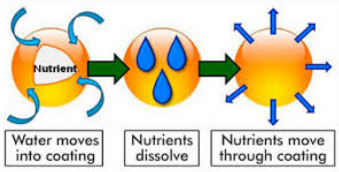
Nitrogen helps leaf growth. Phosphorus helps the growth of roots and flowers, and Potassium is important for the overall health and well-being of the plant. When to promote leaf or root growth is really the key to successful lawn nutrition. You want healthy leaf growth in the growing season to encourage a stronger grass plant, but you don't want to go into winter with too much leaf that can be damaged by the bad weather.

High nitrogen fertilisers will encourage quick leaf growth but potentially make the plant more susceptible to the attacks of pests and diseases. Phosphorus is important going into winter when you want to encourage a healthy and robust root system to support your lawn throughout the challenging months ahead.

Another important factor in selecting the right lawn fertiliser is the type of nitrogen actually in the product. Nitrogen fertiliser may consist of fast-release or controlled-release nitrogen. For lawns, fertilisers containing controlled-release nitrogen sources are suggested for most applications. Lawn care professionals tend to use coated granular product. The coating is formulated to break down gradually over time, therefore providing a slow release of fertiliser as the plants require it. It tends to be more expensive but it certainly is effective, provides professional results and gradual grass growth, rather than a sudden burst of growth resulting in excess mowing requirements.

So we have covered composition and also timing of application. Let's take a look at application methods. Most home owners who buy their lawn feed from the garden centre will have a choice between granular or liquid feeds. As we mentioned earlier, ideally you want a product that releases its nutrients into your lawn slowly, as required, over time. There are two downsides to liquid feeding. The first is that it is immediate. Your lawn gets an instant food hit then nothing. A bit like the all you can eat restaurant. You leave feeling full but soon return to that hungry state! The other issue is that liquid feeding can be very time consuming and it's difficult to get the application rates right.

Controlled-release granular feed is by far the best choice. However most gardeners will attempt to apply this themselves and this can create issues. Firstly application by hand is almost impossible to get right. The granules slip through your fingers easily and distribution is uneven. Apply too much to one area and you will scorch the grass, often blackening or killing it in patches. Uneven application results in uneven grass growth.



Ideally what you should use is a broadcast spreader. This consists of a hopper which holds the fertiliser and releases a controlled amount onto a rotating disk which is powered by the forward movement of the wheels and distributes the granules across the lawn in a controlled and even manner. The amount of fertiliser released from the hopper is controlled by adjusting the holes in its base. Getting the quantities right is important so as not to over or under fertilise your lawn and you must calibrate the spreader before you use it based on the flow rate of the fertiliser, the granule size the application rate required and the size of the hopper holes. It's important not to miss any of the lawn or to overlap as you make each pass with the spreader.

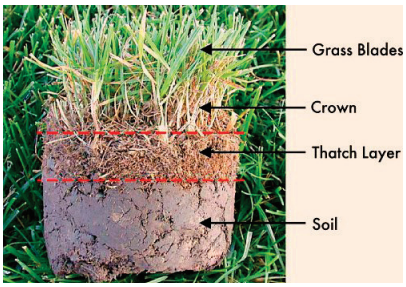
I've tried to make things as simple as possible but lawn nutrition, product selection and application rates can be relatively complicated. By the time you have bought the product, the right applicator and factored in the time it takes to carry out the work, you can usually save money by asking a lawn care professional to help look after this part of your garden for you. After all, if you want professional results then a professional is usually the person to ask.

10 Spring Lawn Care Essentials - Let's look at what can be done now to get your lawn ready for a beautiful summer

1. Moss

Low light levels, shade and increased rainfall creates the ideal conditions for moss to colonise your lawn. Always apply a moss killing treatment after you have raked or scarified your lawn in order to kill and loose pieces of moss. Never, ever mow into moss. If you have moss in your lawn that you can't remove then raise your mower blades so the grass leaf is at least 2cm above the moss.

2. De-thatch



Thatch is a layer of organic matter that lays on top of the soil just above the roots of grass plants. It has little or no microbial activity, unless you get involved it will not decompose. It prevents water and nutrition reaching the roots. It reduces the amount of air in the soil that's essential for healthy plant life. Spring is the right time to dethatch turf. Cutting into the thatch to introduce air spaces is ideal. Boosting microbial activity with a compost tea - yes, you heard me, you can make a tea from compost and its super for your lawn health.

3. Aerate

Aeration is by far the most beneficial mechanical process for your lawn. Soil relies on beneficial fungi and bacteria which make micronutrients available to grass plants and also produces growth hormones whilst protecting the plants from attack from pests and disease. Worms and insects also need water, air and food. Roots grow in the air gaps between the soil particles, not in the soil itself. By aerating your lawn, you are introducing the air gaps essential to support that soil activity. In addition, aeration relieves compaction and helps reduce waterlogging too.

4. Rake

Using a spring rake removes debris and helps the grass leaf stand upright. When things begin to grow again in the early spring it's a good idea to give your lawn a bit of a hair-brush, get things standing to attention and ready for a mow. Spring raking removes lingering autumn leaves and grass blades that didn't survive winter. Do it now!

5. Over-seed.

Repair bare patches in your lawn by over-seeding. Remove the dead patch of grass with a rake. In-fill with compost and mix seed into the top layer. Give it a good water and wait until the seed germinates

6. Fertilise

All living things need food, they also need the right kind of food in the right quantities. Many home-owners seem to forget this. Lawns need the right amount of Nitrogen, Potassium and Phosphorus throughout the year. The occasional sprinkle of a 3-in-1 spring feed from the garden centre is not really cutting it. If you are going to feed your own lawn focus on quality over quantity. Focus on feeding the soil and let the soil feed the plant. If in doubt, speak to a lawn care professional

7. Weed control

Catch weeds early in the season if you can. Professional weed killers either cause the weed to produce excessive growth hormones and grow themselves to death or they inhibit the plant's ability to photosynthesise and they starve to death. Some weeds are harder to control than others. Weed control is complex, get it right and your lawn's going to look great this summer.

8. Water

It costs less than £5 to water the average sized lawn. You only really need to do that every other week. Give it an inch of water (measured in a container on the lawn). Lawn care professionals use wetting agents, they keep water in the root-zone and mean that you can apply half as much water whilst getting the same results.

9. Mow

The majority of lawn issues I see can be traced back to a poor mowing regime. It's relatively easy to get it right. Make sure your mower blades are sharp. Cut off no more than a quarter of the leaf length each mow. Start from different places on the lawn. Ideally mulch mow, leaving clippings behind to feed the essential soil microbes.

10. Edge

Cutting a neat edge will help define the lawn Ensure you use a half-moon edging tool and make sure it's sharp. Work from a board that you stand on along the edge you are cutting. If it's a curved edge you need then lay a rope or hose out first to ensure you are happy with the curve you are about to cut. Ensure the edge you cut slopes away from the turf. If in doubt, look on YouTube.

Garden weed control can be challenging, let's understand why

When I first began studying plant science I remember a tutor asking me; 'Kenyon, when is a daffodil a weed'? The answer it seemed was simpler than I knew at the time. Weeds can be described as any plant growing in an area where it is not wanted. If that daffodil is in your rose-bed it might be considered a weed. If your lawn grass is in your flower-bed it most certainly is a weed.

You must hold a suitable qualification as a paid professional applying pesticide to control weeds. If you ask your regular gardener to do it, and she doesn't hold a licence, then you are both breaking the law. The general code of practice covering the use of pesticides states that you should attempt other forms of control before you start to use pesticides to control a weed issue.

Weeds can be relatively small like clover, or large like thistles. They are typically fast growing and spread rapidly, impacting on plant growth in and around them. Weeds are characterised as narrow leafed like grasses, broad-leafed liked dandelions or woody like brambles. Large weeds can often be removed by hand, but removing smaller weeds from your lawn may require an effective pesticide.

Pesticides used for treating weeds are often called herbicides. There are two types of herbicides; selective herbicides control only certain types of weeds, typically either broad-leafed or grass-like weeds. Non-selective herbicides control and kill all plant types with which they come into contact. The application of a broad-leaf herbicide will affect and control the growth of broad-leaf plants. As such, this herbicide can usually be applied onto existing lawns, but will control only broad-leaf weeds. A grass herbicide controls the growth of grass type plants. Grass herbicides can safely be applied to flower beds and will have no impact on broadleaf plants, but will control and impact on grasses.

How weed killers work

Some work by disrupting the fine balance of biochemical processes that occur within the plant. Often causing uncontrolled growth, twisting, thickening, elongation, and eventually death. The weed literally grows itself to death. Others target photosynthesis, the process where plants produce energy from sunlight. Blocking photosynthesis is only part of the story. When photosynthesis is blocked, highly toxic oxygen and other compounds form within the plant. These compounds rapidly destroy cell membranes, causing the weed to die.

Many selective herbicides target enzymes within plant cells. Enzymes allow complex chemical reactions to occur. When herbicide targets an enzyme it disrupts the sequence of complex chemical reactions, producing highly toxic compounds in the plant and killing the weed. So why don't selective herbicides kill the useful plants we are trying to grow? The main reason is because the useful plants are able to metabolise (break down) the herbicide more rapidly than the weeds, allowing them to survive.

When to use weed killers

Herbicides are most effective on actively growing plants, as the active ingredient is carried by the sap of the plant. The faster the plant is growing, the quicker the solution will be moved through the plant. Application during less active growth periods are also effective, however the results will take longer.

How to use

Weed plants fall into different families. Much like sprouts and cabbage are different plants but within the same group of plants, some weeds are in the same family group and some in different groups. Certain plant groups are susceptible to certain herbicides that other groups might not be affected by. Identifying what weed you need to kill, understanding which plant group it is in and what pesticide needs to be used to treat that specific group is the key to weed killing success. All herbicides have application rates. Much like medication you take at home has a recommended dose. Exceed the dose and you may cause issues, take too little and there may be no effect. Getting the dose right isn't just about how much you pour out of the bottle, it's also about how much water you add to the mix and how much of the mix is applied to the weed.

Is one application enough?

If you select the correct herbicide for the weed you aim to kill, use the correct dose rate and apply at the right time then often one application is enough. However some weed varieties are more resilient than others. Some have thick leaf coatings or hairs that reduce the contact of the droplets of pesticide that have been sprayed on the weeds. Some weeds are persistent and are not controlled after only one application and several, consecutive applications are recommended. Applications may be necessary throughout the growing season and should continue until the weeds have been successfully controlled. Failing to do so may increase the weed's resistance to the type of pesticide used – much like the risks of not finishing a course of antibiotics. Often additives can be used along with the pesticide to increase the efficacy of the chemicals present.

Remember, weeds are fast growing and quick to set and disperse seed. These seeds germinate to form new weeds, so regular herbicide applications are essential. It's relatively complex, which is why you need to study for an exam to carry a licence to use pesticides. For effective lawn weed control speak to a lawn care professional.

It's thirsty work for a lawn during the summer; let's look at the problems and how we can help.

You may be wondering why your lawn in turning brown and what you can do to help it remain healthy throughout the summer.

Drought and heat

When temperatures rise and rain doesn't fall, lawn grasses become dormant. Brown grass leaves are a good indicator that your lawn is beginning to suffer from drought. The plant protects itself from death by withdrawing available moisture to the roots, causing leaf die-back. When moisture returns the lawn will soon recover, however you may want to water your lawn so you can enjoy its lush and healthy appearance throughout the summer season.

When and how to water

The biggest mistake made when watering a lawn is too-little, too-often. To help your lawn to become more drought resistant add enough water to encourage a deep root run so grass is more capable of finding water in the soil when things dry up. To green up a browning lawn add one inch of water once a week. If you simply want to ensure your lawn doesn't die completely during a severe drought add half-an-inch of water every two weeks. To measure how much you are watering simply place a container on the lawn under the sprinkler spray.

Alternatives to watering

Science is a wonderful thing and a number of products have been developed for the management of tennis courts, golf courses and bowling greens. These products, not available on the high-street, can help to improve the water retaining ability of your lawn. Help to make grass plants more drought resistant, and greatly improve the appearance of your lawn during dry periods. Speak to a lawn care professional for more information; you may be surprised how effective and affordable this is compared to running up a large water meter bill.

Fungal disease

Warmth and moisture can help promote fungal attack of your lawn grasses. Brown patches on your lawn may be an indicator that your lawn is under attack. Watering and moisture from dew add to the problem. Early diagnosis followed by the relevant treatment is essential. It's important to examine the area of grass around that which is dying in order to correctly diagnose the problem. If you have patches of brown on your lawn speak to a professional who will be able to help put it right.

Acidity

Grass plants require a neutral pH level to enable them to access available nutrients. High pH could well be a contributing factor to grass browning once it becomes stressed from high temperature and low rainfall. Ask a professional to take soil samples and test the pH. If necessary a correctional treatment plan will address the pH balance and give your lawn the opportunity to thrive.

Insects

Lawns support a variety of insects, most are beneficial. Your lawn could be under attack from its two greatest pests. The first is the chafer grub; the young of the cock-chafer beetle. The second is the leather jacket; the young of the crane fly. Both of these pests damage the roots of grass plants and can be a cause of die-back during times of heat and water stress, when the lawn struggles to compete with its hungry nemesis. Correct nutrition and treatment plans will keep this problem under control.

Doggy doo – doggy don't!

If a dog uses your lawn as a toilet then the nitrogen and other compounds in the dog urine can cause grass scorch. This is especially noticeable during periods of dry weather as the rain isn't washing the urine through the soil and diluting it. There are products on the market to help reduce the impact of dog urine on your lawn if you think it might be a part of the problem.

What's hiding beneath?

Do you really know what's hiding beneath that area of brown grass in the middle of your lawn? Might there be something under the surface preventing roots from become well-established? At other times of year the grass plants can cope with these obstructions, but once you introduce the stresses of heat and drought, only those plants that are healthy and receiving the right nutrition will survive.

Mowing and nutrition

Mowing your lawn at the correct height throughout the season will greatly help it when the weather presents challenging conditions. If your lawn is correctly mowed, has a weed and feed treatment programme in place and has fungal issues treated correctly, to ensure it is healthy, then it will be capable of coping with the stresses of drought and heat. A lawn that is already suffering from stress before the challenging weather arrives will fair less well. Speak to a lawn care professional to ensure your lawn looks its best throughout the year and is something you can enjoy and be proud of.

Let's look at some common lawn problems and how to deal with them

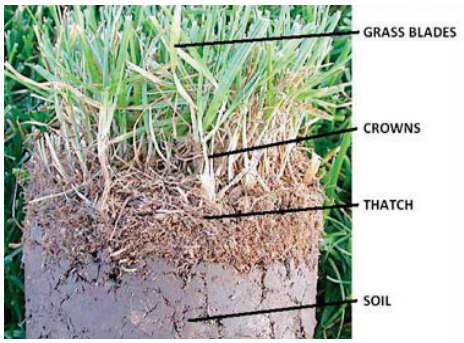
You really should be enjoying your garden to the full during the summer months. The days are long, the weather is warm and your garden should be looking great and inviting you outside. However, if you are really honest, what score would you give your lawn out of ten and would you really like it to be scoring a little higher?

I look at a lot of lawns and I meet a lot of people who are disappointed with their lawn and want to see some improvement. Many feel that there is no option other than lifting their existing lawn and starting again from scratch. However much can be achieved through lawn renovation which is generally far more cost effective and less intrusive than completely re-seeding or re-turfing your outside space.

So, you may be wondering what to look for in your lawn and what can be done to improve it. Generally I group my assessments into three main areas to see what needs attention and where improvements can be made.

Thatch

Thatch is a layer of organic matter, typically dead moss, dead or dying grass, stems, roots and other plant life, between the surface of the soil and the green living grass leaves above. In some lawns this layer can be quite thick and prevents water and nutrients from penetrating through to the soil below. Excessive thatch causes the soil to dry out and your lawn grass plants to suffer as a result. Some thatch is a good thing as it protects the soil and growing lawn. However, too much thatch is a common lawn problem that needs to be dealt with appropriately.



Thatch is dealt with through scarification with a garden rake for smaller areas, or a mechanical scarifer for larger lawns or more intensive removal. This process tears out the dead plant life and opens up the soil surface. It's a tough job and your lawn will look a little battered for a short while afterwards, but the long-term improvements are essential if you want to enjoy a healthy luscious lawn in the future.

Compaction and drainage

Regular foot traffic over your lawn will compact the soil structure, resulting in fewer air gaps in the soil, restricting the flow of water and nutrients through the soil to the roots of your grass. Compacted lawns dry out more quickly and support fewer beneficial insects and worms. They have lower counts of essential microbes required to break down dead plant life, resulting in a build-up of thatch. The symptoms of compaction are thin, stressed turf grasses that are more susceptible to disease and pests, allowing gaps in the turf for weed seeds to germinate. In addition, compaction can result in waterlogging due to poor drainage and this encourages moss growth.

Compaction is dealt with through aeration of the lawn, either with a garden fork for smaller lawn areas or a mechanical aerator for a more effective result. It's hard work, but the benefits to your lawn are invaluable.

Nutrition and pH

All plants need the correct nutrition to live a healthy and disease free life. All too often I visit lawns that never receive any supplementary nutrition or perhaps get a general sprinkle of something from the garden centre once a year. The home-owner wonders why their lawn looks so poor, and the grass is almost starving to death through malnutrition!

pH is the measure of the acidity of any given compound. Ranging from 1 which is acidic to 14 which is alkaline. The issue is, that a pH imbalance can 'lock-up' essential plant nutrients, making them unavailable to the growing lawn grasses and no amount of additional fertiliser is going to address the nutritional issues.

When recommending a lawn nutrition treatment plan I always test pH levels and ensure any underlying pH issues are resolved before nutrition begins.

If your lawn isn't offering you as much satisfaction as it should then summer is the time to think about addressing any underlying issues. As we approach the warm, wetter autumn weather and beyond, grasses respond well to repair work. Speak with a lawn care professional who can make a full assessment of your lawn and offer guidance on what reparation works will benefit your lawn through the winter and heading into spring. Make a full assessment of your lawn and think about what improvements can be made of the the autumn , what reparation work ne3eds to be carried out for your to enjoy a beautiful lawn the following year

Lawn ants

Lawn ants can be a real nuisance, let's take a look at what can be done to reduce their numbers. Ants, like bees, live in a colony. An ant colony is made up of one or more fertile, egg-laying females and many hundreds, if not thousands of worker ants. The job of the queen, once she has mated, is to stay in the nest and lay eggs. The workers care for the queen and her eggs, protecting and feeding them. House-keeping the nest and foraging for food.

The eggs are laid deep down in the nest, in a specialised brood chamber. The tiny larvae are fed a liquid diet by the worker ants and when this stage of development is complete they pupate before becoming adult ants – and the circle of life continues. At certain times of year some species of ants produce winged females en-mass which fly off in search of a mate and once mated then find a suitable place to establish their own colony. You've probably witnessed this phenomenon yourself, typically on a hot and humid summer's day.

Why are ants in lawns a problem?

Most ants in the garden are more of a nuisance than a damaging pest. However, in the UK a number of garden ant species will attack when under threat. Whilst this is unlikely to cause anything more than an unpleasant reaction, it can certainly be enough to spoil a picnic or make you think twice before sitting on the lawn with bare legs. It can be particularly unpleasant for small children wanting to play outside.

Other than their bites or the spray of their acid, the other major concern that I come across related to ants in lawns is the damage they cause by bringing soil to the surface whilst excavating their nests. This causes two main problems – the first is that over time their excavations make the lawn uneven and cause ant-hills which are easily scalped as you mow the grass. Secondly the soil they bring to the surface is often flattened under foot or when mowing and can cause the grass to die back through lack of light. In both instances the result is a bare area ideal for the germination of weed seeds or moss spores.

Killing lawn ants

As gardeners we should be doing all we can to work with nature and not be heavy handed in our approach. However, focussed and specialist action against garden pests is certainly justified. Many gardeners attempt to deal with ants themselves and often do this with traps, powder or boiling water. All of which is relatively unsuccessful and runs the risk of killing more grass than it does ants. Remembering that the colony exists because of the egg-laying queen, unless she is eradicated then the colony will continue to function. Surface applied powders and traps are doing little more than killing worker ants. The queen continues to lay eggs and the many hundreds of workers still in existence continue to feed them.

How do lawn-care professionals manage a lawn ant problem?

Throughout the summer period I visit many home owners who are frustrated by the damage ants are causing in their lawns. We use a specialist insecticide mixed with a wetting agent applied to each nest as a drench. The wetting agent helps the pesticide penetrate deep within the ant's nest and to spread laterally through the soil – maximising the chances of reaching and killing the queen.

Dealing with ant hills

If you do have ants bringing soil to the surface of your lawn then try to redistribute the soil with a broom or besom before mowing. If their excavations have made your lawn uneven this can be repaired by cutting and peeling back the turf before making levels good again and treading the turf back in place. Remember to water it in well.

Attempts of getting rid of lawn ants are not as simple as you may think and you may actually make the situation worse. Asking a lawn care professional to help with the problem and ensuring any insecticides are applied safely will get the results you are looking for.

Please remember that anyone using pesticides in your garden on your behalf must be licenced. If they are not then you are both breaking the law.

Fungi & Disease

So, your lawn was looking lovely. You admired it only a few days ago. Freshly mowed, lovely and green. What more could you want? Suddenly you notice something's not quite right. The grass is changing colour... in a day or two and things look considerably worse – now you're getting worried! Let's take a look at fungal attacks, what causes them, what can be done when they appear and how to prevent them.

Mushrooms are magic!

Before we get started let's get one thing straight; there are many toadstool type fungi you may see on your lawn. They look similar to the mushrooms you buy in the supermarket, in so far as they have a stem and a cap with fins and spores below the cap. These are the fruiting body of fungi living in the soil and they are generally an indication of good, healthy soil with lots of organic matter. They may be poisonous, so if they are bothering you and you want to remove them, be sure to wash your hands afterwards.

Pathogens

Three things need to be present for a fungal attack to occur. The pathogen needs to be present; conditions need to be right to support the pathogen and there needs to be a host for the disease. Most of the pathogens that cause an outbreak will already be present in your lawn. When weather conditions support the proliferation of these pathogens their aim will be to multiply and colonise other areas. This is when that small area of concern that you initially noticed can become a real eyesore.

Appearance

Knowing what you're looking for is important. It's easy to misidentify and become concerned unnecessarily. What's more important however is knowing what you can do to prevent these often-devastating outbreaks – more on that later. Whilst most fungal attacks are unsightly, the good news is that they rarely kill the grass plant and mostly their impact is on the leaf and therefore on the appearance of your lawn. That being said, don't underestimate the devastating effect they can have on the appearance of your lawn over a long period of time. Your lawn may look unsightly for the whole summer.

Once the disease appears focus needs to be on aiding recovery and limiting it's spread. Yes, we can apply a fungicidal treatment at this time but, on the whole, once you see it the damage has already been done and you won't reverse that. The other thing to consider is that fungicides are not entirely your friend. They are indiscriminate and therefore also kill beneficial soil fungi, essential for a healthy lawn. We work hard to develop friendly fungi in the lawns because their benefit within the soil is magnificent. We don't want to undo that with one unnecessary application for an outbreak that we could have prevented with the right preparation.

Treatment

When we discover a fungal attack, our focus is on treating the grass not treating the fungi. As mentioned earlier, on the whole the grass will recover and our efforts are focussed on aiding that recover. We are the Florence Nightingale to your poorly lawn, but usually without a lamp. So rather than applying a fungicide which will have little positive impact we focus on boosting nutrition, re-growth and therefore recovery. Through the spray application of a specialised blend of macro and micro nutrients, liquid seaweed concentrate, carbohydrates and magnesium we aim to give your lawn a shot-in-the-arm and get it growing again so the greenery returns as quickly as possible.

Prevention

We all know that prevention is far better than cure. We have considered what the outbreak looks like and what we can do once it happens. We have also identified what factors contribute to a fungal outbreak and we now know that some of these factors are outside of our control; the weather being a major contributor. So, what can be done to reduce the risks of a fungal attack thwarting your lawn bragging rights?

6 steps to lawn disease prevention

- Firstly, think about the grass itself. Certain varieties are more susceptible than others. Some of the modern grasses have been bred specifically for their disease resistance and whilst more expensive they should always be selected when adding seed to an existing lawn.
- Next comes your mowing regime. The right frequency and mow height with sharp blades is essential. Poor mowing weakens grass plants and weak plants are more susceptible to attack.
- Then we have nutrition. Any living thing that is not receiving the right nutrition is more likely to become ill. The risk of the illness can be reduced through the right nutrition, as can the speed of recovery. Your lawn is no different. Occasional feeding is not enough. The right products, in the right quantity, at the right times is essential.
- We then have environmental factors. Disease pathogens love thatch and mossy lawns. Reduce these conditions through regular scarification and aeration. The latter aids stronger root development and with this come greater access to nutrition and water.
- That brings us nicely on to watering. Drought causes stress -stressed plants are more likely to be affected by fungal outbreak. Watering is important - correct watering is essential. Often fungi like warm wet conditions. Try to prevent these conditions by watering in a morning so the sun dries the grass leaf quickly and it doesn't stay wet all night.
- Finally, as lawn care professionals we monitor conditions through national turf-care reporting systems which enable us to predict when an outbreak might occur. We know which of our clients have lawns that are more susceptible to fungal disease and we are then able to notify them in advance and recommends preventative treatments where they are most needed.

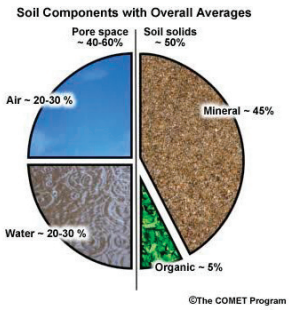
Holey Moley – Let's look at the importance of aeration

We mostly judge our lawns by the appearance of their leaves. Let's take a moment to consider the importance of the soil structure in the health of your lawn. Within the soil, a network of roots not only anchors the plant, but also acts as it's access to essential nutrients and moisture. Without a healthy, fully functional and well-developed root system your grass plant is never going to thrive.

Mind the gaps

Roots don't actually grow in soil. Roots grow in the gaps within the soil, working their way deep into the ground through the network of tiny crack between the minerals and organic matter that makes up what we call soil. Soil should comprise of 25% air, 25% water, 45% minerals – that's what you get when large rocks are broken down over time. Let's not forget the remaining 5% which is humus. Not the chickpea dip, humus is the organic matter created when animals and plants decompose and it's the essential food source for life within the soil.

As soil forms from the action of weather on rocks, plants begin to grow in it. These plants mature then die and new ones grow in their place. The leaves and roots of the dead plants are added to the soil. Animals eat plants and other animals. Their waste and, when they die their bodies, are added to the soil. Bacteria, fungi, worms and other creatures break down plant litter and the animal waste or remains and these then become the organic matter which help create healthy soil.

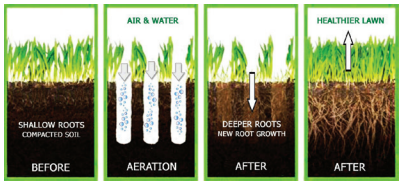


Life's essentials

All living things need three essentials to survive. Whether you're an elephant or an earthworm, unless you have water, air and food you're not going to survive for very long. Restrict any of these three essentials and that living thing is going to suffer and struggle to be healthy. Grass plants are no different and neither are the microbes within the soil, critical to the health of your lawn.

Compaction – it's a hard life

Now you have a bit of background about what your lawn soil is made up of, let's talk about the importance of air gaps within your soil. Lawns get a lot of foot traffic. We are out there barbecuing, kicking a ball around or pegging out laundry. Over time this foot traffic compacts the soil beneath your lawn, gradually reducing the air gaps which are essential to life. Less air means fewer insects that break down dead plant material. It also means less microbial activity. This is a major issue. Beneficial microbes create a relationship with the plant roots, making important nutrients available and producing growth hormones that protect the plant from pests, parasites and diseases. Fewer microbes means the balance of nature is upset – don't upset Mother Nature!



Feeling gassy

Air gaps within soil are essential for the plant. Without air your grass would die. Plants don't just breathe through their leaves. For roots to be healthy they too must breathe. Roots take in oxygen through tiny hairs within the gaps in the soil. When roots have limited access to air gaps in soil this gaseous exchange is compromised. Plants will be weakened, making them less vigorous and more susceptible to attack from pests and disease.

Loosen up man

So, what can we do to help nature along and create a healthier environment? The answer is aeration. Aeration is the mechanical introduction of air spaces within soil to provide the essential balance needed to support soil life and healthy roots. You could do this with a garden fork. Stamp the fork into the ground, rock it back and forth, remove and repeat - over the whole lawn area. Trust me, this is really hard work. Lawn care professionals use petrol-powered aerators specifically designed for the task. It's still hard work but its far more effective than a garden fork. The aerator is fitted with a metal tine that is driven deep into the ground to create a hole. If a hollow tine is used it pulls out a small plug of soil which is deposited on the surface of the lawn and soon breaks down. The surrounding soil now has the space to 'relax' into the hole, creating cracks and gaps within the soil and more air spaces. These newly created holes also allow dead plant matter into the soil where it can decompose and be broken down by insects and beneficial microbes, creating a heathier soil environment.

Root pruning

Hollow tines cut into the soil and also cut through the roots of the grass plants. As these roots re-grow, they do so in a more fibrous way with a greater surface area. More root area means more access to food, water and air – the essentials for a healthy plant. Aeration is by far the most beneficial mechanical process for any lawn and should ideally happen at least once a year.

Drainage issues

Finally, compaction issues are often responsible for water-logging. When the air gaps become filled with water instead of air they prevent the roots from accessing the essential air needed for life. The lack of air in the soil also impacts the life of beneficial bacteria and promotes the growth of damaging bacteria which reproduce in anaerobic environments, This virtual 'soil death' will result in actual grass plant death. Regular aeration relieves compaction which can reduce waterlogging.

Autumn is the ideal time to renovate your lawn. Let's take a look at what can be done

The days become shorter, the sunlight less intense and rainfall increases. Moss begins to flourish. Let's take a look at what can be done to improve things. Like all living things, those that are unhealthy, stressed or run-down are more susceptible to pests and diseases. Whilst moss is neither a disease nor an insect pest, it can certainly be a pest in lawns. Lawns that are in poor condition are far more likely to suffer moss problems. You may be wondering what moss is, why it's in your lawn and what can be done. Mosses are flowerless plants that reproduce through the production of spores or from small pieces of existing moss that break away and settle on a suitable growing medium. Cool, damp and shaded areas provide the perfect environment for mosses to thrive.

Moss in lawns

Moss can quickly smother out your grass plants. When things turn dry, moss quickly loses it colour and before long your lawn appears brown and dead. Chafer grubs love to live in mossy lawns. Birds love to eat chafer grubs. Ignore lawn moss at your peril, completely lifting and replacing a lawn affected by this kind of damage can be costly.

Mosses grow in lawns in many conditions. I often see lawns that are neither shady nor damp but still have major moss problems. If you have concerns about moss in your lawn it's best to speak to a lawn care professional who can carry out suitable soil sampling and advise on the correct regime to get the problem under control.

Practices and factors

Lawn care practices can be a major cause of moss establishing itself in your lawn. Mowing too short, too infrequently or not following the correct mowing height for the time of year can be a big contributor. As can incorrect nutrition, not dealing with thatch or compaction and not removing leaves from the lawn regularly. Bare areas should also be dealt with promptly so as not to leave space for moss spores to germinate. A healthy dense grass sward leaves little room for moss or weeds to take up residence.

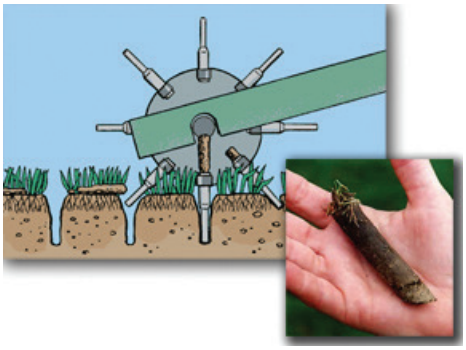
Environmental factors play a big part too. Poor drainage or heavy shade means the soil surface and grass remains wet for long periods creating ideal moss growing conditions.

Dealing with moss

So now you know what moss is and what causes it to take up home in your lawn, you can probably begin to work out how to deal with it if you have it, or how to prevent it in the future. The first thing to think about is nutrition. Ensure the lawn has the correct nutritional plan in place, so it's receiving the right nutrients at the right time of year. Healthy grass, like healthy people, is in a better position to fight off invaders.

Secondly deal with any shade issues. If there are overhanging branches that can be removed to help with light and air-flow consider doing this when these plants are dormant over winter.

Next you need to consider drainage issues and compaction. Many lawns benefit greatly from aeration to remove plugs of soil from the lawn and improve drainage, air circulation and penetration of water and nutrients to the plant roots. Top-dressing following aeration is particularly good practice and massively beneficial.



If you already have moss in your lawn this can be treated. Some people try this themselves with lawn-sand but the results can be hit and miss, with the grass often being killed at the same time. Our approach is a liquid treatment combined with a wetting agent that helps penetrate deep into the thick matting of moss. Not only does this kill the moss but it also acts as a tonic for the grass, encouraging re-growth and stronger grass plants.

Once the moss has been killed it's time to remove it. This can be hard work over a large area where a petrol driven scarifier is essential equipment for the job. It's time consuming and pretty hard work but its important to get the dead moss out and will reduce thatch at the same time.

The final process is over-seeding. Introducing new, healthy grass plants to in-fill the gaps left by the moss that's been removed. Creating a stronger, healthier lawn that's more capable of dealing with the challenges nature throws at it over the winter months.

Now is the ideal time to get your lawn in shape. The wet weather of autumn provides the ideal growing conditions for your lawn.

Leaves & Lawns

Those wonderful autumn colours soon become a lawn nuisance. Let's take a look at leaves. As the summer fades so do the leaves on deciduous trees – that's the ones that aren't evergreens and lose their leaves every autumn. The tree begins to extract anything of use from the leaves and the toxins that are left behind provide the spectrum of autumn colours we all know and love. However, whilst they look wonderful on the tree and are great in a woodland, leaving them on your lawn for any period of time can cause some major issues.

In their natural environment, that's woodland, the leaves that fall at the base of the tree play an essential part in the circle of life. These leaves, once wet, begin to break down. They act as an essential food source for the fungi that call the woodland their home. Fungi are great at breaking down leaves and in turn they hold a mutually beneficial relationship with the tree roots, helping them to access essential micro-nutrients.

It's a bug's life

So why isn't there a mass of leaves built up over the years of autumn fall? The leaves at the base of the tree don't stay on the surface for long. They are shredded by insects. Some are dragged into the soil by worms. Once there they are broken down further, encouraging bacterial activity and contributing essentially to the health of the soil.

Don't leave the leaves

We do our best to remind our lawn care customers of the importance of not letting leaves lay on the lawn. We know it seems like a never-ending task, but during the leaf-fall season it really is important to get out there and get them off the lawn. Ideally you should be doing this every week. But why is this so important?

Green leaf plants need sunlight to survive. Once that light is blocked out, they will soon begin to suffer. They use this light to create food, without it they starve to death. In addition, a build up of leaves on the grass soon begins to prevent air circulation. If air can't reach the surface of the soil then there will be a lack of oxygen in the soil and that means that all those beneficial insects, essential for healthy soil, will begin to die. When their population is decreased so is the health of the soil.

Soil biology and air

There are many different bacteria within your lawn soil. The good guys are essential for soil health. They help protect and feed your grass plants. Without them the lawn will never be green and healthy. Then there's the bacteria baddies. Trying to attack the plants and cause them harm. The important thing to remember is that good bacteria reproduce in an aerobic environment – one with lots of oxygen. Bad bacteria like an anaerobic soil, without air. So, reducing the amount of air able to get into your lawn soil means that the bad guys are going to beat the good guys. And that's super bad for your lawn.

Fungi

What conditions do fungi like to live in? Damp and dark conditions I hear you shout. In autumn when then leaves fall, rain is rarely far away. Once those fallen leaves and the grass leaf and the rain all get together for a party on your lawn the conditions are perfect for the fungi to join in too. What I'm really trying to say is that wet leaves left on your lawn create the ideal conditions for your lawn to be attacked by damaging lawn diseases.

Moss loves bare earth

Moss loves the autumn. Damp days, low light levels, none of that nasty hot sunshine to dry it out. When moss spores settle on bare soil it quickly establishes and begins to compete with your lawn grass plants. So, by allowing leaves on your lawn to cause areas of grass to become weak or maybe die back altogether you are creating the ideal growing environment for moss. We don't want mossy lawns because its just creating more work in the spring. Now here's the great news. Leaf compost is brilliant for your beds and borders and it's really easy to make. Rake the leaves into some black bags. If they are not already wet then add a splash of water. Throw in a trowel full of soil from your garden and tie up the bag. Punch a few holes in it to let air in and find somewhere out of sight to store them.

By the following autumn the leaves will have been broken down, they can be added to the top of your beds and borders as a mulch and you can repeat the process all over again. Easy peasy lemon squeezy!

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