



# OHIO GARDENER

OHIO'S OWN GUIDE TO GREAT GARDENING & LANDSCAPING

## Ideas from a Metaphysical Garden

A garden brought  
to life through  
dynamic design Page 57

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**GROW BAG  
GARDENS**  
Down and dirty  
containers.  
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**DAHLIAS:**  
The toughest part is  
choosing one.  
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# Lawns

The lawn is the backdrop to our gardens, but it is often ignored. Here are a few pointers on keeping the green grass, well, green.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT A. ZANON

**E**very homeowner wants the nicest and best-looking lawn and to have their neighbors be green with envy. Living in USDA Hardiness Zones 5 and 6 for the most part means that we have cool-season grasses to care for and nurture.

In our yards, turfgrass is the basis of a beautiful landscape. Keeping our lawns looking their best year round is challenging for sure. This condensed version of “Lawn Care 101” hopes that by gaining a little more knowledge, following the guidelines, and tweaking some management practices in your particular region, you too can have a healthy and viable stand of turf.

## Soils

Good soil is a major component of having a great lawn. Six inches of good topsoil and some organic matter is a must. Most types of turfgrass thrive with a neutral pH — so it may be prudent to have your soil tested.

## Grasses

In our region, cool-season grasses both rule and thrive.

- Kentucky bluegrass is a very popular creeping type that prefers full sun, but may cause some thatch issues.
- Perennial ryegrass is a bunch type that prefers full sun and is high-traffic tolerant.
- Fine fescue (creeping red) is a bunch type that is also shade tolerant.
- Tall fescue (turf type) is a bunch type that prefers full sun, but will tolerate some shade and is high-traffic tolerant.
- Bentgrass is a creeping type rarely found on residential properties that requires full sun and short mowing height.

## Water

Watering deeply but infrequently enables development of a deeper and healthier root system that will help your lawn endure periods of heat and drought. If drought causes your lawn to go dormant, fear not as the grass will not die as long as the crown of the plant is still alive. About 1 inch of water per week during the active



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growing season is a good guideline, and morning watering is preferable to reduce evaporation. Wise water use is a sure sign of a practical and thoughtful gardener.

## Mowing Practices and Heights

- Keep your mower blades sharp and balanced and mow when the grass is dry (for less clumping).
- For the first few early spring mowings, cut at a lower cutting height (2 inches) to remove dead grass blades and expose



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When planted together, trees and turf compete for sunlight, water, nutrients and ground space below surface level.

sunlight to the crown, which will promote a greenup.

- A good rule of thumb — never remove more than one-third of a grass plant in one mowing.
- Change the mowing pattern each time you mow. Alternating the patterns causes more upright growth.
- Bagging your grass clippings is not necessary. Mulched grass clippings left on the lawn add organic matter and even provide a small source of nitrogen.

Clippings do not promote thatch.

- With the exception of creeping bentgrass, mowing your lawn at a higher cutting height has huge benefits. Taller grass allows for great photosynthesis and healthier stands of turf. It also shades out weeds, and increases the drought and disease resistance. My suggestion is to mow at 3 inches tall.
- For the last few mowings of the season, cut the grass low again (2 inches) to avoid potential problems such as snow mold. This problem occurs in areas where winter snow cover is common.

### Shade

It is a well-known fact that trees and turf do not get along well, and it is best to keep them separated. However that is certainly not always the case. They compete for sunlight, water, nutrients and ground space below surface level.

Shade can be the biggest obstacle when trying to maintain turf and trees together. Two somewhat incompatible plants are forced to coexist together, and both are expected to perform optimally. This type of co-planting reduces the quantity

of light available to turf and the length of time it is available. It leads to reduced turf density, increased root competition, and increased weed invasion. The trees reduce air circulation, which can create additional problems with turf diseases. Shade is a major stress factor for turf.

Despite their differences, turf and trees can peacefully coexist and even thrive together. That balance can be attained. Armed with an understanding of how each affects the other, decisions can be reached to modify the environment and maintenance procedures to optimize the growing conditions for both.

If after thinning, limbing-up, or removing trees shade remains a problem, plant shade-tolerant ground covers, perennials or annuals in landscape beds where these will thrive.

### Fertilization

An essential nutrient for all plants (including grasses) to survive and thrive is nitrogen. Now I am not going to pontificate and tell you that you need to fertilize “X” times a year. What I am going to suggest is do what you are comfortable with — but



I typically mow my lawn at 3 inches tall in warm weather, and apply a slow-release fertilizer with crabgrass control between March 1 and 15, an optional fertilizer application with broadleaf weed control between May 15 and 30, straight fertilizer about Sept. 1 and then a high-nitrogen fertilizer around Nov. 15.

I stress the importance of late-season fall fertilization. Below is what I practice on my lawn with very successful results.

1. Apply a fertilizer (slow release) application with crabgrass control between March 1 and 15 (consult your local university Extension office for precise dates in your area). If you plan on seeding the lawn in the spring, do not apply the pre-emergent herbicide for crabgrass as it will inhibit seed germination.
2. Between May 15 and 30, apply an optional second round of fertilizer with broadleaf weed control. This has to be put on grass that is wet (so the herbicide will stick to it) and effectively controls the broadleaf weeds. If you have few broadleaf weeds, I suggest you simply spot treat them or if you have none, just use straight fertilizer. If grubs are an issue, apply grub control now (consult your local university Extension office for precise dates in your area).
3. By Sept. 1, your lawn is starving at this point, so apply straight fertilizer.
4. Around Nov. 15, apply fertilizer with a high level of nitrogen. This is the most



I am a huge fan of core aeration every fall or every other fall in mid to late September.

important fertilization of the year. If you choose to only feed your turf once a year, this would be it. At this time of year, the plant uses the feeding to promote root growth all winter long. Another benefit is an earlier spring greenup.

### Aeration, Dethatching, Seeding, and Overseeding

- In our heavy clay soils, I am a huge fan of core aeration every fall or every other fall in mid to late September. Besides helping to reduce compaction by allowing oxygen, moisture, and nutrients into the root zone, it also reduces thatch.
- Speaking of thatch, it is an almost impenetrable mat of intertwined and tangled grass on the ground surface. If



If you choose to only feed your turf once a year, late fall would be the best time.

you have a lawn primarily of Kentucky bluegrass, you may have this problem. If so, dethatch the lawn with hand- or machine-powered thatch removers and note that you will not need to do this every year. I suggest mid to late September.

- If you have large patches of the lawn that need to be seeded or overseeded, please do so by mid-September for best establishment prior to winter. And remember to water seeds and then water some more for best germination.

Scott Zanon is the author of *Landscaping with Trees in the Midwest: A Guide for Residential and Commercial Properties*. He also holds degrees from The Ohio State University in agronomy (turfgrass management) and horticulture (landscape horticulture).