



## Lawns

A healthy, attractive lawn is possible without pesticides, wasting water or fertilizer run-off. The healthiest lawns start with good soil and full sun. For shady areas, slopes or near waterways, consider lawn alternatives such as native plants and ground covers. Let's start with a basic lawn calendar for Western Washington.

### Spring

- If you did not do it at the end of last season, be sure to sharpen the mower blades or buy a new mower blade
- Mow regularly to about 2" to 3" and remove only 1/3 of grass length at each mowing – this encourages deeper roots, better drought and disease resistance, and helps crowd out weeds. Mow weekly in spring – cutting too much of the grass length at once stresses the grass. Mulch-mowing (leaving the grass clippings on the lawn) provides free fertilizer (nitrogen) and does not cause thatch build-up.
- Fertilize in mid-May, if needed. If lawn is thin or yellow, apply 1/2 to 1 lb. of nitrogen per 1000 sq. ft. – read the label for application guidance. Have soil tested every few years to determine fertilizer and lime needs. Avoid "weed & feed" fertilizers and choose no-phosphorus fertilizers to protect our waterways. If you choose to use a pesticide/herbicide, be sure to read the label carefully and follow all warnings.
- Don't let weeds go to seed. If removing dandelions be sure to dig out the taproot to prevent its return.
- Improve thin areas – aerate, overseed and top-dress with about 1/4" compost – April/May or September are the best times. New lawns should be seeded in spring, prior to Memorial Day or in fall, after Labor Day. Choose a lawn seed suited to the Pacific Northwest – a fine fescue and perennial ryegrass mix based on your sun conditions.

### Summer

- Mow as needed. Water deeply, about 1-inch per week – or let lawn go dormant. Water dormant lawn slowly and deeply once in July and once in August – and avoid heavy traffic.

### Fall

- Overseed and top-dress thin areas (September/October)
- Remove weeds before they go to seed
- Fertilize as needed, using an organic fertilizer (September-October). A slow-release synthetic fertilizer can be applied as late as mid-November. Add lime if needed.

### Winter

- Don't walk on frozen or water-soaked turf
- Have mower blades sharpened in preparation for spring

### Lawn Problem – Moss

Moss in lawns is generally a result of poor drainage, too much shade or acidic soil – often all three. While there are chemicals for moss control, without remedying the cause, the moss will simply return. Aeration will improve drainage and lime will reduce acidity. Alternatively, the moss can be left alone. Aerifying machines can be rented.

### Lawn Problem – Thatch

Some lawns develop thatch – a layer of old roots and stems – and if this layer becomes too thick the lawn will thin out. Soil that is compacted, low in organic matter or microorganisms is more susceptible. Thatch can be removed with a thatching rake or power thatcher. Power dethatching machines can be rented. Aeration will also help. The lawn will then need to be overseeded and top-dressed.

## Lawn Alternatives

Home gardeners may choose to reduce or eliminate lawn areas to reduce maintenance and water usage. Alternative plants should be chosen based on site conditions (e.g., sun, slope, drainage, HOA rules), intended use (e.g., edible gardening, pollinator garden, patio, walkway) and personal preference. Low-growing alternatives include common yarrow, creeping thyme, moss, clover and chamomile. Eco-lawn seed generally includes some of these and can be found at local nurseries and seed companies. Additional advice and resources:

- King County yards & lawns resources, "Honey, I shrunk the lawn":  
<https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dnrrp/nature-recreation/environment-ecology-conservation/yard-garden/yards-lawns/shrunk-lawn>
- Snohomish County *Rainscaping Guide*, lawn alternatives section (p. 42-46, includes lawn removal via sheet mulching guidance):  
<https://snohomishcountywa.gov/DocumentCenter/View/102499/Lawn-Alternatives>.  
Immediate removal of a small lawn area can be accomplished by shovel. A sod removal machine is useful for larger areas. Sloped areas may require professional assistance to ensure erosion control.
- Oregon State University Extension Service:  
*Through thoughtful practices, lawns can be climate-friendly:*  
<https://extension.oregonstate.edu/gardening/lawn/through-thoughtful-practices-lawns-can-be-climate-friendly>  
*When it's time to say goodbye to lawn, uproot it first:*  
<https://extension.oregonstate.edu/news/when-its-time-say-goodbye-lawn-uproot-it-first>

## Lawn Care Resources

There are numerous local resources with more detailed advice on lawn care and renovation – all listed below are free.

**WSU publications** available at [pubs.extension.wsu.edu](https://pubs.extension.wsu.edu):

- Fine Fescue for Home Lawns, FS200E
- Home Lawns, EB0482E
- Phosphorus and Home Lawns, FS058E
- Drought Tolerant Landscaping for Washington State, EM087E (Page 7-10)
- Watering Lawns in Washington to Save Water, Save Money, and Have a Healthy, Green Lawn FS362E

**WSU Hortsense** at [hortsense.cahnrs.wsu.edu](https://hortsense.cahnrs.wsu.edu) includes a "Lawn and Turf" section which covers about 30 lawn diseases and insect pests, including cultural, mechanical, biological and chemical control methods. Hortsense also offers 90 fact sheets to assist the home gardener manage weeds in landscape, turf and bare ground areas.

*Additional Master Gardener Tip Sheets, including "Gardening Websites" and "Gardening Publications" are available at*

<https://extension.wsu.edu/king/mg-home/gardening-resources/tip-sheets/>

*Also see WSU's "Gardening in Washington State" at*

<https://mastergardener.wsu.edu/resources/gardening-in-washington-state/>

*and free downloads of WSU gardening publications at [pubs.extension.wsu.edu](https://pubs.extension.wsu.edu)*

*The Master Gardener Program in King County is made possible by the fundraising of our non-profit Foundation. To learn more and contribute, please visit [MGFKC.org](https://mgfkc.org)*

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