

# GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR LAWN MAINTENANCE IN MARYLAND



University of Maryland  
Turfgrass Technical Update  
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Dr. Peter H. Dernoeden, Turfgrass Specialist  
University of Maryland Department of Natural Resource Sciences & Landscape Architecture

Many homeowners do not realize that once the lawn has been established there are regular management practices that must be followed to ensure lawn quality. This publication is intended to provide a quick reference to general lawn management principles. In addition to basic guidelines, this publication is a reference source for more detailed information on specific subjects.

By following the principles outlined here, many potential problems can be avoided. The most common causes of poor lawns include:

- \* Poorly adapted species or cultivar(s) were planted
- \* Improper use of fertilizers and limestone
- \* Poor watering practices or poorly drained soils
- \* Too much traffic or compaction of soil
- \* Mowing the lawn too closely or too infrequently
- \* Failure to replant areas damaged by pests or stress
- \* Too much shade
- \* Poor weed control practices
- \* Uncertified seed or sod was used



## Turfgrass Species and Cultivars

Information about species and cultivars suitable for Maryland is provided in "TT-77: Turfgrass Cultivar Recommendations For Maryland". This and other Turfgrass Technical Updates can be found at [www.md turf council.org](http://www.md turf council.org).

In general, tall fescue is the lawn grass best adapted for Maryland's soils and climate. Kentucky bluegrass provides the most aesthetically pleasing lawn turf, but it requires a higher level of maintenance than tall fescue. Perennial ryegrass cultivars have been improved in recent years, but this species is not recommended for use on lawns due to its susceptibility to many diseases.

Fine leaf fescues (i.e., creeping red, Chewings, sheep and hard fescue) perform well in acid soils and moderate shade, but don't tolerate low mowing in summer (See "TT-41: Establishing and Maintaining Fine Leaf Fescues For Low Maintenance Sites"). Zoysiagrass is perhaps our best low maintenance grass for lawns, but it is slow and expensive to establish (see "TT-69: Planting and Care of a Zoysiagrass Lawn").

## Mowing

Low and infrequent mowing are perhaps the major causes of lawn deterioration. When mowing, never remove more than one-third of the leaf surface at any one time. For example, if the desired mowing height is 2.0 inches, do not allow the turf to grow higher than 3.0 inches before mowing.

It is best to maintain the mowing heights shown below for spring and autumn year round; however, height of cut can be reduced during autumn and winter. Mow as needed, but avoid mowing when turf is under heat and drought stress and return clippings to the lawn.

## KEY POINTS

Tall fescue is the best all-purpose turf species for Maryland

Seed mixes that contain annual ryegrass or perennial ryegrass are not recommended

Proper mowing is the most important need for healthy turf maintenance.

The Home and Garden Information Center Hotline is 800-342-2507.

The proper mowing heights for lawn grasses are as follows:

Lawn grass	Spring and Summer	Autumn and Winter
Kentucky bluegrass	2.5 - 3.0 inches	2.0 inches
Perennial ryegrass	2.5 - 3.0 inches	2.0 inches
Tall fescue	2.5 - 3.5 inches	2.5 inches
Fine leaf fescue	3.0 - 4.0 inches	3.0 inches
Zoysiagrass	0.5 - 1.0 inches	0.5 - 1.5 inches

## Fertilizer and Limestone

Lawn grasses, other than zoysiagrass, should be fertilized 1 to 3 times during autumn months with nitrogen. Zoysiagrass should be fertilized in late May or June. Between 75 and 100% of fertilizer applied annually should be applied between September and December for Kentucky bluegrass, tall fescue, perennial ryegrass and fine fescues.

Slow release nitrogen (N) fertilizers such as sulfur coated urea, methylene urea or natural organic products are preferred. Water soluble materials such as urea and ammonium nitrate are good performers and less expensive, but they acidify soil more rapidly and provide a shorter-lived greening response. Established turfgrasses have relatively low requirements for phosphorus and potassium (potash) fertilizers.

Apply 1.0 to 2.0 lb/1000ft<sup>2</sup> of phosphate (P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>) and potash (K<sub>2</sub>O) annually for most grasses. Complete fertilizers are identified on the bag by three numbers (eg. 10-10-10), which correspond to a percent by weight of N + P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> + K<sub>2</sub>O contained in the bag. There is some flexibility, but a good schedule for nitrogen fertilizer use is shown below.

	Pounds of nitrogen fertilizer per 1000ft <sup>2</sup> by month				Nitrogen/1000ft <sup>2</sup>	
	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Mid-May	June	Annual total
Kentucky bluegrass	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0*	0	3.0 - 4.0
Perennial ryegrass	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0*	0	3.0 - 4.0
Tall fescue	1.0	1.0	0	1.0*	0	2.0 - 3.0
Fine leaf fescues	0	1.0	0	1.0*	0	1.0 - 2.0
Zoysiagrass	0	0	0	1.0	1.0*	1.0 - 2.0

\* Apply only if turf has poor color, density or vigor.

Limestone should be applied when a soil test shows a pH lower than 6.0. For most lawns, apply 50 lbs of limestone per 1000 ft<sup>2</sup> of lawn in autumn or winter. Limestone works slowly and may take many months to reach its full effect.

## Watering

The best time to water the lawn is during early morning hours on an as needed basis rather than on a fixed schedule. Water is most effectively applied when turf develops a blue-gray or purplish color and/or when turf lays-down, leaving a footprint after being walked upon. When watering, it is very important to water slowly and to wet the soil to a depth of 4 to 6 inches. This can be a laborious process, but will yield long-term benefits in water conservation. Light and frequent applications of water are detrimental and can result in restricted rooting and increases in disease and weed problems. For more information on watering consult "TT-62: Irrigation and Water Conservation on Home Lawns."

## Weed, Disease, and Insect Pests

Maintaining a thick, dense lawn through proper mowing, fertilizing and watering is the best approach to weed control. Despite adherence to sound cultural practices, however, crabgrass and broadleaf weeds often become troublesome. Crabgrass is best controlled with a preemergence herbicide (see "TT-43: Herbicides For Crabgrass and Goosegrass Control" before seed germinates in spring. For Central and Southern Maryland, these herbicides should be applied March 15 - April 1, and for Northern and Western Maryland they should be applied April 1 - April 15.

Herbicides for broadleaf weed control (see "TT-49: Broadleaf Weed Control in Established Lawns") are most effective if applied in May or mid-September when weeds are growing vigorously. Always read pesticide labels carefully. There are many guides available to assist homeowners with insect, weed, and disease identification, but often it is best to take samples of injured turf to your county agent for a more precise diagnosis, who can also provide guidance for dealing with pests. The phone number for the Home & Garden Information Center is 800-342-2507.