



City of Olympia Waterwise Gardening Class June 14, 2005

Natural Lawn Care

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Five Keys to the Good-Enough Lawn:

1. During dry weather, water once a week, but water deeply.
2. Improve your soil with organic based lawn foods - in May and Sept.
3. Mow high, letting grass grow to 3 inches, to shade soil. Leave clippings.
4. Call your weeds wild flowers - or get busy with a screwdriver.
5. A sharp mower and clean edges will make any lawn look better.

The middle of March is time for lawn renovation. The cool rainy weather is a fine time to scatter lawn seed on top of thin lawns, deal with moss, and level off uneven playing fields. If your field of dreams looks more like the lawn of nightmares, this may be your year for turf wars.

Some of these lawn renovation steps are excerpted from “Easy Answers for Great Gardens” – available from local bookstores or mail order from my Web site at: www.binettigarden.com. These steps are for homeowners who want a lawn that can be kept green and somewhat weed free without using chemical weed killers and continued use of high nitrogen fertilizers.

Planting a New Lawn on Top of an Old Lawn:

- First, aerate the old lawn by renting a core aerator to poke holes all over the old turf.
- Mow the old lawn as short as possible to cut the tops of spring weeds.
- If your lawn has lots of low spots or drains poorly, rake two inches of sand in those areas to level the lawn.
- Now is the important part. You need to spread an organic based fertilizer first and then at least 2 inches of good topsoil or compost right on top of the old lawn. More and more companies are making an organic based lawn food as we realize the dangers of quick release chemical nitrogen. Look for slow release nitrogen from Lily Miller, Ringer, Safer and Whitney Farms brand of fertilizer.

- Rake and level the new topsoil and then sprinkle a Northwest mix of lawn seed, making sure to choose a mixture with the improved patented lawn seed varieties, and not a single type of grass such as all blue grass or all bent grass.
- You'll not only be mowing by May, but the spring rains will do the watering for you, the old lawn will push up through the soil layer that will smother most of the weeds; and by using organic based lawn foods, the earthworms will return and help do the work of aerating and feeding your new turf.

Just Say “No” to a Chemically Dependent Lawn:

First, admit there is a problem. It may take group intervention with that neighbor who has the “perfect” lawn, as often these perfectionists refuse to admit that they have a chemical addiction. Once they become hooked on the instant gratification and adrenaline rush of “weed and feed” chemicals, going back to a healthy diet of slow release nitrogen seems slow and unexciting.

The first year you wean your lawn from chemicals is the most difficult, as the withdrawal symptoms can be ugly. Natural lawn foods are more expensive, but do save you money in the long run.

Avoid hanging out with old friends with perfect lawns. These are users, still immersed in the addiction cycle. They may even be angry with you for breaking free of the addiction you once shared. Taunting organic lawn care converts with names like “granola eater” are common tactics. Ignore them. Five years from now these users will still be wasting money on the fast fix nitrogen, but most of the lawn weed killers will be off the market - and your organic lawn will be able to cope, thanks to deep roots and healthy soil.

When you start to weaken and long for a deeper green and easy weed control, take off your shoes and walk barefoot through your chemical free lawn. (Maybe not the same day that you apply an organic compost tea or manure topdressing).

Keeping your lawn free from chemicals that leach into our groundwater means changing lawn-mowing practices as well. Just say “No” to the low mow. Letting the grass blades grow taller as the weather heats up in the summer will shade out most broad leaf weeds. Get comfortable with a lawn that is trimmed just a bit when the blades reach three inches in height. Water only once a week in dry times, but water deeply, so that the top foot of soil is soaked. This will encourage the grass roots to penetrate down to the water table where they can quench their thirst on their own.

Right Plant, Right Place

Hot, dry and poor soil: Choose sedums, succulents, and plants with gray foliage such as lamb’s ear, artemisias, lavender, and lychnis.

Shaded, cool, and full of slugs: Choose slug and shade resistant plants such as native ferns, huckleberry and salal and groundcovers from the lamium or pulmonaria family.

Poor drainage: Members of the willow family and the red twig and yellow twig dogwoods will adapt to low wet spots. Perennials, like Siberian Iris and Candelabra primroses also thrive in damp areas.