

BEST PRACTICES



Help Spring Your Lawn into Action the Healthy Way!

Spring is finally upon us. Spring blossoms are awakening and so are our lawns and gardens. When we think of our lawns, we do not often think about the importance of what lies beneath - the soil, water, worms, micro-organisms and nutrients. Each component is vital to the health of the grass that grows in the soil. Healthy soil encourages healthy roots. This, in turn, creates healthy lawns!

Healthy Soils = Healthy Lawns

Many common lawn care activities can negatively impact the health of soil, which can make our lawns vulnerable to weeds and unwanted insects. Over watering, soil compaction, overuse of chemicals and ignoring soil health all have adverse effects on soil. Over time, the soils in our lawns can become compacted from foot and vehicle traffic, leaving less room for oxygen and making it harder for water to soak into the soil. Grass roots have a difficult time growing in compacted soils, but some weeds can thrive in them, like dandelions. In addition, the use of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers can kill beneficial micro-organisms that are essential for creating and maintaining healthy soil.

The good news is that it's easy to improve the health of your soil, and spring is a great time to jump-start the process!

Five Easy Steps to Healthy Soils and Healthy Lawns:

1. Aerate: Aerating your lawn removes small plugs of sod and soil, which improves root development by allowing air and water to infiltrate, or soak into the soil. Aeration is the most effective way to loosen up compacted and/or poorly draining soil. You can rent an aerator or hire a lawn care service to aerate for you.

Tip: You can leave the plugs on the lawn to decompose or, for a neater look, rake the plugs into a pile and compost them.

2. Overseed & Top Dress with Compost: After you aerate, overseed with a perennial rye/fine fescue grass seed mix designed for the Pacific Northwest and top dress with $\frac{1}{4}$ inch to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch of fine compost. The compost will cover the seed and improve soil health by keeping the soil "spongy" and adding nutrients. If you like flowers, use a grass seed mix with white or red clover. The clover will add nitrogen to the soil to help the grass grow.

3. Use a Slow-Release Organic Fertilizer: If you are planning on fertilizing, you can apply a slow-release organic fertilizer prior to top dressing with compost.

Slow-release fertilizers rely on soil organisms and other processes to "release" nutrients at a rate at which the plants can use them. This makes it less likely that the nutrients will wash away. Typical synthetic fertilizers tend to force-feed lawns at rates that are too fast for lawns to fully absorb the chemical fertilizers. Excess chemicals are



**More than
Just Dirt!**
*Did you know
there are over
4 billion micro-
organisms
in a teaspoon
of health soil?*

carried by stormwater into streams, lakes and Puget Sound often contributing to water quality problems, particularly in the warmer summer months.

4. Use Your Grass Clippings to "Feed" Your Lawn. The soil in your yard needs nutrients to grow healthy grass all throughout the growing season. An easy and no cost way to provide this nutrition is through "grass-cycling". Each time you mow, leave the grass clippings on the lawn to provide free nutrients to your lawn. This will also help your soil store more water and stay nice and cool.

Also, before you mow your lawn this spring, make sure to remove and sharpen the mower blade, which will make a "clean" cut of the grass blades to help prevent diseases. Next, adjust your lawn mower to cut your grass at a height of two inches. Mow the lawn and leave the clippings on the lawn.

***Studies Show:** It's best to cut only 1/3 of the grass blade at a time.*

So, let your grass grow to a height of three inches, and then mow it to a height of two inches.

Doing this will help stimulate and maintain healthy root growth.

5. Just Say "NO" to Weed & Feed! "Weed and feed" products combine quick-release fertilizer and weed killers. These products spread pesticides all over your lawn and often contain chemicals for pests and weeds that are not even present in the Pacific Northwest! In addition, the chemicals can kill the beneficial micro-organisms that help create healthy soil. It's much more efficient, cost-effective and healthier for the environment to hand-pull weeds or if hand pulling is not an option, "spot spray" weeds. Weeds often thrive in nutrient-poor, compacted soils. So, the best way to combat weeds is to build healthy soil (See Steps 1-4).

Invest Now for a Healthy Lawn All Year Long

By following these 5 steps to build and maintain healthy soil, your efforts will reflect in a greener thicker lawn! Healthy lawns grow deep roots, which will help to out compete weeds and keep grass green in summertime with less watering. This summer, you'll spend less time raking your grass, less money on pesticides and more time enjoying your lawn. It may take a little time and energy on the front end, but the investment will be well worth it once you see the results!

Resources for Creating and Maintaining Healthy Yards

You can view the following lawn care resources on Thurston County's Public Health's Common Sense Gardening Guide's website at: <https://www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/ehcsg/guides.html>

- **Fertilizer** - A Common Sense Guide
- **Weeds** - A Common Sense Guide
- **Grow Smart, Grow Safe:** A Consumer Guide to Lawn and Garden products
- **The Common Sense Gardening Guide to Natural Lawn Care**

Source: Stream Team News, Spring 2011