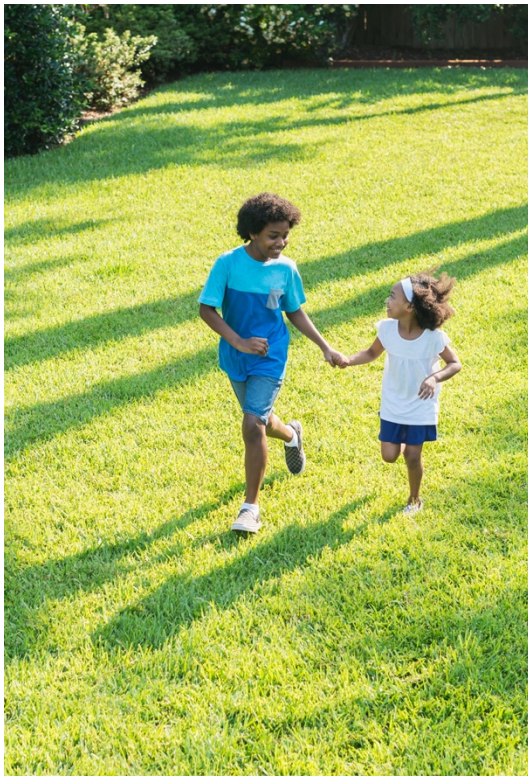
BEST PRACTICES

A Green Healthy Lawn Naturally. Am I Dreaming?

A Local Momma's Journey to Natural Lawn Care

Dreaming about that lush vibrant green lawn that will make all your neighbors say (or think) oooooo lala? That lawn is totally attainable naturally, and I want to give you the tips to get there successfully while saving some dollars down the road.



So, what's the story here?

I never knew anything about lawncare and didn't care to. I even joined movements in the past against growing lawns entirely. Maybe some of you have heard of them… "Grow Food Not Lawns?" It wasn't until I had a family with a baby and a dog that I truly recognized the usefulness and appeal of a nice lawn, and over time I began to want one.

Don't get me wrong—I'm still more of the gardening type, but a relatively small patch of cushy lawn has become a piece of the dream for me. I wanted to understand how to have a healthy green lawn that would be safe for my family and less likely to harm our local streams and Puget Sound.

Here's what I've learned so far.

Having a healthy lawn starts with healthy soil. One of the most important factors in soil's ability to support and grow green lush lawn is its pH. pH is a measure of how acidic or basic something is, ranging from 0–14, with 7 being neutral. When pH is under 7 it is leaning more acidic, and when it is over 7 it is getting more alkaline (or basic).

Western Washington soils are naturally very acidic. In fact, in a local study 194 soil samples were collected and sent to a lab. Of these samples, 9 were shown to be too alkaline and only 18 came back within the ideal pH range of 6.2–6.8. 167 samples came back as too acidic. That's roughly 90%! Why is this? Well, it turns out, this acidity is largely due to three factors:

1. **Applying fertilizer (which is acidic).**
   If you've owned your home for 20 years and have been applying fertilizer 3–4 times annually without rebalancing the pH, you likely have imbalanced acidic soils.
2. **We receive a lot of rain in Thurston County, and our rain makes our soil more acidic.**
3. **Our soils are naturally acidic based on our geologic history.**

As a gardener, it's always smart to understand your soil health before attempting to grow anything in it. The same thing applies to lawns. Get your soil tested, and specifically focus on the pH results. The pH of your soil will determine how effectively microbes and micro and macronutrients are able to survive in the soil and ultimately reach the plant roots.

Remember that rebalancing your lawn-soil ecosystem may take some time, so don't be surprised if there's a period where things look a bit worse before they get better. Think of it as a lawn detox and hang in there!

- If your soil test results indicate low pH, purchase some lime to apply to increase your soil pH (if necessary).
- Aerate your lawn yourself or hire a professional to do this BEFORE applying lime and fertilizer.
- After aerating and adding lime, wait 2–3 weeks before fertilizing.
- Apply slow-release fertilizer following the instructions on the bag. Measure your lawn size and weigh the fertilizer to ensure you are using the right amount for your lawn. Over-fertilizing will damage your lawn, end up in our waterways and waste money!
- Make sure you water in your slow-release fertilizer immediately after applying it. Alternatively, you can plan to apply it right before it rains.
- Use slow-release fertilizer 2–3 times annually, skipping the summer.
- Mulch mowing will recycle nutrients to your lawn, help keep your soil moist when its hot and add organic matter to your soil. Be sure to sharpen your lawn mower blades annually to avoid damaging your lawn. Mowing high, 2–3 inches, will help your lawn retain moisture and will shade out pesky weeds.

So why use slow-release fertilizer? There are a few reasons.

1. **Slow-release fertilizer is coated, making it safer than quick-release fertilizer for your family and pets.**
2. **Slow-release fertilizer is used by your lawn more efficiently and is held longer in the soil for the plant to access.** Think of slow-release fertilizer like sitting down for a meal 3 times a day (or as we're hungry). With quick-release fertilizer, this looks more like sitting down for all 3 of your meals at once, and then throwing away the extra food you can't eat.
3. **Without wasting unused product, your lawn ends up needing less slow-release fertilizer long-term—saving you money.**

Let's be real. Weeds, moss and critters are a fact of lawn care (and gardening). Balancing your soil's pH will support a healthy lawn that can outcompete weeds and moss. Aerating 1–2 times per year will also help fight weeds and keep your grass resilient.

When thinking about your relationship with moss, ecoPRO certified landscapers have provided this honest advice… embrace the cushiness! If you absolutely cannot accept moss, then realize that ridding your lawn of it will likely be a constant effort and will require hard work. Moss killer DOES NOT remove the moss and can be toxic to wildlife and aquatic species . If you choose to apply moss killer, be prepared that you will have to use a dethatcher to remove the blackened material in its entirety. Follow with aerating, reseeding, consistent deep watering, and continue to refer to the recommended list of behaviors in natural lawn care listed above.

Learning the basics of natural lawn care has made me feel more empowered. The added confidence of knowing how to have that dreamy lush green lawn while keeping my family safe is something I want to share with others. And making the move to slow-release fertilizer is also protecting our underground drinking water, local lakes and streams, and Puget Sound. Win win!

Interested in more information like this?

Visit the City of Olympia's Natural Lawn Care website for some great educational videos: **olympiawa.gov/services/water_resources/storm_surface_water/pollution_prevention/natural_yard_care.php**

Stay tuned for Thurston County's Go Green Lawncare program launching in Spring, 2023.

Source: Stream Team News, Summer 2022