



## Lake-Friendly Lawn Care

Lake Winnebago Quality  
Improvement Association



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Source:  
**Great Lakes Great Lawns: A Homeowners  
Guide to Growing Lawns Without Pesticides.**  
Wisconsin's Environmental Decade Institute.  
1996. Madison, Wisconsin

*Runoff of nutrients and pesticides from residential lawns is one of the causes of poor water quality in our lakes and waterways. And, it doesn't matter where you live. Surface water laden with fertilizer, silt and chemicals runs off lawns into ditches, culverts, storm drains, and creeks – eventually making it all the way to lakes like Lake Winnebago, even from miles away. The result is turbid waters, algae blooms and invasive weed issues that interfere with natural habitat and recreational enjoyment of our natural aquatic resources.*

**But don't I want my lawn to look nice?**  
**Sure!** But, keep in mind that a lawn is a living thing. Trying to make it as perfect as cut-pile carpet or artificial turf will not make it healthy or resilient. Most lawns are over fertilized, mowed too often and cut too short. A lawn can be healthy without excessive fertilization and will be less susceptible to weed growth without all that pesticide, if it is managed with "lake-friendly" practices.

## Love Your Lawn – Love Your Lake

### Lawn Care Quick Guide

#### April

- Lightly rake dead spots and patch seed
- Sharpen your lawnmower blade

#### May

- Mow high (3 inches)
- Don't fertilize in the spring

#### June

- Raise mowing height to 3 ½ inches

#### July

- Don't mow more often than necessary
- Sharpen your mower blade
- Aerate lawn with a core remover

#### August

- Don't mow if the lawn has not received moisture in the past 10 days
- Aerate lawn with a core remover late in the month

#### September

- Lower the mowing height to 3 inches
- If you use fertilizer and/or pesticides, do it now

#### October

- Over seed the entire lawn with a good seed mix – preferably after a good frost
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## Grass Makes Its Own Food

Grass makes sugar from carbon dioxide in the air through photosynthesis using energy captured from the sun by the plant's leaf blade. The sugars are broken down and combined into fats, proteins and other things the plant needs. The roots gather water and raw materials required for photosynthesis, as well as storing nutrients. Healthy grass has both good top growth and a deep root system. Plenty of leaf blade exposed to the sun is needed to grow deep roots. The deeper the roots the better able the plant is to gather nutrients to support top growth and withstand drought.



## Grass Does Not Grow The Same All Season Long

In early spring, the energy goes into developing deep roots. With warming temperatures, the leaf blades shoot up. Come midsummer, both leaf growth and root growth slow down. In late summer and early fall, cooler days bring a pickup in leaf growth again. Growth reverts again to concentrate on the roots in late fall. This rhythm is important for how you care for your lawn at different times during the growing season.



## Mow Grass High

The most common mistake most people make is cutting the grass too short. If the foliage is too short, the plant can't grow deep roots and access water in the ground. At the same time, short leaf blades can't shade out weeds. Tall grass does not need fertilizer. With more leaf blade exposed to the sun, the grass is more able to manufacture its own food.

Leaving clippings on the lawn may supply all the nitrogen it needs to stay healthy. Tall grass can better tolerate hot and dry conditions by shading soil so there is less evaporation. Plus, it keeps sun away from weed seeds, making them less likely to germinate.

Keep your grass at least 3 inches high and don't cut off more than a third of the leaf at each mowing to avoid stressing the plant. Hence, when it reaches 4 ½ inches, mow to a height of 3 inches in spring and 3 ½ inches in summer. You'll need to mow more often in spring and fall than midsummer. Mow based on grass height – not because it's Saturday. You will mow less often in the long run.

Oh, and, sharpen your mower blade twice a year to avoid a dull blade tearing and damaging grass, inviting disease and insects.

## Use A Mixture of Grasses

Different grass varieties have advantages and disadvantages. Kentucky bluegrass is beautiful but, by itself, requires high nutrient levels (regular doses of fertilizer). It's a sun-lover so won't do as well in shady places. Fine fescues (creeping red fescue, chewings fescue, sheep fescue, hard fescue) are low maintenance and more tolerant of shade and a variety of soil conditions – but they don't handle a lot of wear and tear well. Interestingly, they contain "endophytes," a fungus that resists insects. Perennial ryegrass is a good grass to include in your mix because it germinates quickly although it is less heat and drought tolerant.

To make sure your lawn has the benefit of a variety of grasses, and to assure a dense, thick turf that discourages weeds, over seeding in the fall with a quality mixture is recommended. Simply spread the seed on top of your lawn in late fall and forget it. Freezing and thawing from then to spring will work the seed into the soil for germination when the weather warms.



## Watering

Our lawns don't need as much water as we think. Grasses naturally grow slowly in midsummer when it gets hot and dry. Leaf blades stop growing and turn brown, but the plants do not die. In autumn, when rains come again, they green up. Your lawn may actually do better if you allow this process to take place. If you must water, do it in the morning so the blades dry. Dampness invites disease. Don't water more than 1 inch per week.

## Fertilizer And Pesticide

If you fertilize, do it in the fall and use a slow release fertilizer. Your lawn doesn't need fertilizer in the spring and spring rains are likely to wash a lot of it into drains that take it to the lake. In the fall, the main activity of grass is root growth, likely using the fertilizer for that beneficial purpose.

Fall is the best time for weed killer, too. Apply it when the weeds are actively growing. Come spring, some scattered dandelions will still pop up, but not so many they can't be easily and manually removed with a handy dandelion puller from your local hardware store. Learn to appreciate some other plants that come along during the season. Plants in the clover family, for instance, can add variety and a lush appearance to the lawn. Not only that, they fix nitrogen in the soil and support our declining bumblebee and honeybee populations.

