

Spring Lawn Care

Published 4/30/19 - Public domain image titled "The first power mower in the Missouri Botanical Garden. The mower was gas-driven and water-cooled" from the Missouri Botanical Garden, circa 1918.

Okay spring is here, time to start intensively working on your lawn, right? Actually fall is the best time to do the intensive work, but if you didn't have control over that, it's best to treat your lawn as if it didn't have any fall care at all. No matter what, your lawn is still a delicate creature in the early spring. Shoots are just starting to emerge and even walking a lot on the grass can compress the soil and trampling new shoots to the point of killing them.

So the first order of business is to wait. Yes wait, until the lawn is mostly or all green. Then begin with raking the loose material that landed on your lawn over the winter. Raking not only removes the dead leaves and twigs but gives you a chance to evaluate where bare spots are or damage may have developed. Spread a top soil/grass seed mix to fill in the blanks in these areas.

Only after the raking is done should you consider bringing out the mower. I personally prefer to collect the first few mowing's cut leaves and use them for weed suppression in the garden, but bagging them is not necessary for good lawn health.

We have alkaline soils so it's possible that the soil pH is too high for best grass growth. Compounds such as sulphur and aluminum or iron sulfate, or fertilizers containing ammonium nitrates, urea, or amino acids are most easily applied to existing lawns to lower the pH. In all cases follow label instructions and if anything be conservative in the amount used. You can always add more product to the lawn if it's not enough but it's impossible to remove if too much was applied.

If you properly applied lawn fertilizer in the fall, fertilizer may not be needed first thing in the spring. Cool season grasses like bluegrass, fescue, and ryegrass are good at holding on to fertilizer from the fall and using it all winter. Warm season grasses like buffalo grass could benefit from a fresh layer of fertilizer at the beginning of it's green up.

If your lawn has had weed problems before, consider applying a pre-emergent herbicide that destroys all seeds. Pre-emergents affect ALL seeds so if you're using grass seeds to fill in bare or damaged spots, do not apply the pre-emergent where you put grass seed down. Pre-emergent should only be applied when the expected soil temperatures will remain above 55 degrees for at least 2 days, which is when weed seeds start to germinate. For central South Dakota that's going to be somewhere in the latter half of May when lilac bushes begin to bloom. Pre-emergent applications need to be followed by $\frac{1}{2}$ " of water either through irrigation or a 1-time rain event — not several rains over the course of a week that total up to $\frac{1}{2}$ ".

Our springs, if we have one, are generally favorable to grass growth. Plan on keeping your mower's cutting height at about 3" or slightly more to suppress future weed colonization. This is the start of a healthy lawn.

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