

Lawn Woes

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Q. My lawn is not looking very good. What can I do to make my lawn look better?

A. I would need to know a bit more about your type of lawn and what symptoms are making it look poor. I would also want to know how often you fertilize and your watering schedule. So without making a specific diagnosis I can give you some common issues that may cause lawns to not look their best.

I will assume that you're like most of us in northern California and growing a tall fescue blended with blue grass, these are both cool season turfgrass which grow most vigorously in the spring and fall.

Here are some of the many reasons your lawn could be looking poorly. First, if your lawn is looking yellow, growing slowly and has increasing weeds, such as clover, you may have a nitrogen deficiency. But if you have applied fertilizer recently and your lawn is still yellow it could also be deficient in iron. If your lawn is growing poorly and has a dull blue green color it may need some phosphorus fertilizer. Right now, and again in the spring, are the best times to fertilize cool season lawns. Most years you will need only nitrogen – there will be sufficient phosphorus, potassium and other nutrients in the soil. There are many fertilizers to choose from and it is important to not over apply fertilizer as you can burn the turf or have excess nitrogen run off into area streams or leach into the ground water.

Most lawns need four to six pounds of actual nitrogen applied per thousand square feet during the active growing times. Apply no more than one pound of nitrogen (N) per thousand square feet per application. One pound of N would equal 4.8 pounds of a fertilizer that is 21-0-0. As soil temperatures get cooler you want to use a fertilizer that is specific for winter use as soil microbes are not as active during the winter months. Soil microbes are needed to convert ammonia based nitrogen to a nitrate form that plant roots can utilize.

If you grasscycle (leave the grass clippings on the lawn when you mow) you'll take care of 20% to 30% of your fertilizer needs. You want to fertilize when the grass is dry and then water in the fertilizer.

Improper watering is another reason that lawns look bad this time of year. Check your irrigation system to make sure that it is working properly. Also check the soil after you have irrigated to ensure that you are watering deeply enough. The soil should be moist to at least five inches.

Finally check your lawn area while the irrigation is running to insure that you do not have water running off from your yard.

If there is run off after just a few minutes this could indicate that dethatching is needed, if you have a thatch buildup, or that your soil is compacted. In the case of compaction aerating the lawn can help. If the run off is happening after several minutes it could mean that you just need to set your irrigation system to cycle and soak. This means irrigating an area for 7 to 10 minutes or until run off and then letting it set before watering again for the same length of time. This pattern would be repeated until enough water has been applied to the lawn.

For more information about lawn care see the UC Healthy Lawns site at <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/TOOLS/TURF/MAINTAIN/index.htm>