

Garden Column for the Salisbury Post
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Now is the time to fertilize cool season lawns such as fescue and fescue blue-grass blends. Lawns which are properly fertilized and vigorously maintained can better withstand summer droughts, diseases and other pest problems that plague most homeowners.

Soils need to be tested every two to three years to monitor soil pH and phosphorus levels. Cool season turf grows best with a slightly acid soil pH of 6.0 to 6.5. Soils in the Piedmont area generally have low pH and low phosphorus levels, especially on eroded soils or soils graded during new home construction.

Many homeowners still apply agricultural grade fertilizers such as 10-10-10, 17-17-17 or 30-0-0. These fertilizers are quick release fertilizers promoting rapid growth.

Split applications of grade fertilizer now (1/2 pound nitrogen per 1000 square feet) and again before April are recommend providing one pound of total nitrogen. For example, 5 pounds of 10-10-10 per 1000 square feet delivers 1/2 pound of actual nitrogen per 1000 square feet of turf, or 215 pounds of 10-10-10 to fertilize per acre of turf.

Excessive spring rains and rapid uptake quickly deplete nitrogen and potassium fertilizers in the soil. Late nitrogen applications in late April and May jeopardize healthy turf by predisposing the turf to brown patch and other fungal diseases. Brown patch is the fungal disease that makes huge brown circles in the lawn during June and July.

Slow release, turf type fertilizers, with a 4-1-2 ratio such as (fertilizers such as 27-3-6 or 16-4-8) often contain a coated mix of nitrogen and other elements that slowly release nutrients. Some slow release fertilizers last the entire growing season, therefore it is best to apply these early. Temperature, moisture or bacteria trigger the release of the coated nutrients.

Slow release type fertilizers are gaining popularity because the slow rate of feeding that produces a deep, green turf without excessive growth. Rapid growth generated by grade fertilizers promotes extra mowing in the spring. Slow release fertilizer produces short, even turf growth in the spring; eliminating mowing 2 to 3 times a week

Another reason to consider slow release turf type fertilizers is the ease of application. Most of the turf type fertilizers have bags which are pre-measured to cover 5000 or 10,000 square foot turf areas. Micro-nutrients or trace elements are usually included in turf type fertilizers. Trace elements are essential for growth and development of a lawn.

Over fertilization in the spring is a common mistake made by homeowners. Be very careful and correctly measure lawns to determine proper rates of application.

Fertilization alone does not ensure a beautiful lawn. Weed control, coupled with proper mowing are equally important for a beautiful lawn.

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