

Fertilizing Your Turf Properly

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Have you dusted off your spreader in anticipation of your turf's first dose of fertilizer? Many homeowners take pride in their lawns and want to see them healthy and green. Unfortunately, it is easy to over-apply or misapply fertilizer. You may not see any direct effects, but it can potentially contribute to water pollution by leaching into the groundwater or running into surface water like rivers, streams, lakes, and springs. No one wants to do that, so this article will cover some of the basics for properly fertilizing your turf.



In order to fertilize your turf properly, you have to select the right type of fertilizer and apply it at the right time and in the right amount to maximize plant uptake and benefit. Before you select your fertilizer, you should get your soil tested to determine your nutrient levels and see if you need to add lime to increase your pH. The soil pH is important because if the pH is off then your turfgrass will be unable to easily absorb the nutrients and stresses it out. Insects, diseases, and weeds love stressed turf. The UF/IFAS Extension Soil Testing Laboratory, <http://soilslab.ifas.ufl.edu/>, located in Gainesville will test it for a small fee.

This is a good time to get a soil test and apply lime, if needed, because the time to start fertilizing around here is early April.

After getting a soil test, you need to select a fertilizer. The fertilizer bag will have three numbers on the front which indicate the percentage of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. Nitrogen helps green up the grass and increases leaf material (and mowing), phosphorus helps grow strong roots, and potassium helps grass withstand stress.

Based on soil tests, most Florida soils are high in phosphorus. Because of this, many turf fertilizers have zero as the middle number and that is a good thing.

Most fertilizers have some slow-release nitrogen, providing a longer-lasting response and reducing the potential of burning it. It is often indicated by a percentage of insoluble nitrogen. The more slow-release nitrogen you have in your fertilizer (over 30% of the total nitrogen), the fewer times you have to fertilize the lawn.

Each turfgrass has a different fertilizer requirement which is based on research. The University of Florida has reduced the math by coming up with a table of recommended application rates based on the percentage nitrogen in the fertilizer you pick and the size of your lawn. The publication is called "Figuring out Fertilizer for the Home Lawn." It is found in "The Florida Lawn Handbook" which can be found online at <http://hort.ufl.edu/yourfloridalawn/> or purchased from the IFAS Extension Bookstore or Amazon.com.

As easy as this publication is, most people don't really know the square footage of their lawn. The easiest way to figure it out is to measure how big your footstep is (try for a 3 foot footstep), count how many footsteps you do for the length and width, multiply each by 3, and multiply them together. Do this for your front, back and side lawns, and add them together. Don't include landscaped beds into the amount.

Once you found the proper amount and put it in your spreader, you need to make sure that you don't over apply it. The best way to do that is to calibrate your spreader, so you know exactly what setting to use to deliver that amount. The Florida Lawn Handbook also has a great article on that.

If you have a small strip of lawn, use a deflector shield to keep it from going on the paved area. Around water bodies, leave a 10-ft strip of unfertilized turf to avoid polluting the water.

After you fertilize the lawn, irrigate with $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of water. If you apply too much water, it will go past the root zone.

Take the guesswork out of fertilizing by following these recommendations. If you need more help with your lawn, attend my Turf Boot Camp on Mar 22 from 6 to 7 p.m. at the Alachua County extension office. Leave a voicemail at 352-337-6209 to register.