



Keeping the grass green on this side of the fence (Garden Talk)



By Jefferson County Cooperative Extension

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By Hunter McBrayer

Question: My family and I have recently purchased a new home. All things considered, the home came with a beautiful garden and what appears to be a zoysiagrass lawn. I haven't lived in a home that has a "manicured" lawn before, what can I do to ensure that my yard looks as good as my neighbors? Where should I start?

We get this kind of question VERY often at the office this time of year, particularly the part about your neighbor... In a world where the appearance of your lawn can put you in certain circles, it is important to ensure that you are doing your part to keep your grass up to par.

Though many folks prefer to hire a lawn care company to manage their lawn, the average homeowner is fully capable of keeping that nice green, *almost* weed-free lawn that everyone strives for.

There are a few things that must be taken into account before we begin. You have a good start by knowing that your lawn is indeed a variety of zoysiagrass. Knowing the difference between the types of turf grasses in the beginning can save you a lot of trouble AND heartbreak down the road. While there are many varieties of turf grass available, there are four very common species in our area: zoysiagrass, bermudagrass, St. Augustinegrass, and Centipedegrass. These grasses are referred to as *warm season* grasses versus *cool season* grasses, which include fescue varieties and ryegrass. Oftentimes, especially if you have moved into a home with an established lawn, differentiating between the grasses can be difficult; contact your local Extension office for help in this process to be sure. Some species of grass can be adversely affected by certain chemicals and herbicides. **READ THE LABEL BEFORE APPLYING ANY PRODUCT!**

The first thing to do is to apply pre-emergent herbicides. Pre-emergent herbicides are formulated to do just what the name indicates, to kill weeds before they appear. The key to using pre-emergent herbicides is applying the product at the right time to achieve maximum efficiency. If applying in areas of North and Central Alabama, the spring application should be timed anywhere from mid to late February for best results. If in the fall, mid to late September would be best. Be sure to follow the rates and directions on the label to prevent any damage to the lawn. In the spring, use a product that will control crabgrass and in the fall look for a product to control weeds such as annual bluegrass and hairy bitter-cress. Any weeds that get past the pre-emergent applications can be eliminated with post-emergent herbicides.

To scalp or not to scalp is a really common question that we receive in the spring. Remember that one type of grass is different from another grass, so the recommendations can differ slightly. For your zoysiagrass, scalping is not recommended. Zoysiagrass performs best when it is mowed at a height of $\frac{3}{4}$ " to 2". If your lawn is much taller than that, you can reduce the height *slowly* once you begin mowing after green-up. I emphasize slowly so that the grass is not cut back below the growing point, which can set the lawn back several weeks. On the other hand, bermudagrass can be cut back hard and kept at a length of $\frac{3}{4}$ " to 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Maintaining turf at its recommended height can prevent self-shading, increase airflow and help prevent disease. Also, it is not necessary to remove the clippings from your lawn, in fact

it is recommended that you DO leave them. Clippings can store lots of nitrogen and leaving them in place acts as a fertilizer for your lawn. If you are able to mow frequently, excess clippings shouldn't be a problem.

Fertilizing will help your lawn get off to a good start, but refrain from fertilizing on the first pretty day of spring. Wait until your lawn is completely green and you are well past the last expected frost date. Any fertilizer applied before then will only be feeding the weeds because the grass will still be dormant and will not utilize nitrogen or any other nutrients being applied. Before applying lime, nitrogen, or any other fertilizers, a soil test is recommended to assess the condition of your lawn and to provide recommendations for rates. Soil testing can save you time AND money throughout the year by preventing application of excess product.

Between mowing, fertilizing, and controlling weeds, keeping a lawn can be tough work. But, as with most things, hard work and persistence can pay off in the end. Establishing and following a schedule of care for your turf is important to maintain a healthy lawn all season long. For more information on the care of your lawn, contact your local Alabama Cooperative Extension Office.