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Give your lawn an organic makeover

By Jennifer BLYTH
Black Press

Now that most of summer's long, hot days are past for another year, it's a good time to start thinking about the lawn once again, but that doesn't necessarily mean lime, weed-killing chemicals and synthetic fertilizers, says Christina Nikolic.

The certified organic landscape designer is the owner of Stewardship Natural Landscape Design and director of SOUL – the Society for Organic Urban Land Care. She's also an advocate for restoring a natural ecological balance both in the lawn and in the soil, rather than treating the symptoms of a stressed lawn with chemicals and power tools.

The key with organic lawn care is not only avoiding pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilizers, but also creating a healthy soil ecosystem, which in turn will support a healthy lawn.

And now's the time to get started. With cooler temperatures and more rain, "many lawns that have been dormant get some life back," Nikolic notes.

Here, she offers her suggestions for an organic approach to fall lawn care:



Jennifer Blyth photos

A healthy, balanced soil will keep lawns healthy and weeds at bay, says Christina Nikolic, of Stewardship Natural Landscape Design and the Society for Organic Urban Land Care.



ROUTINE MAINTENANCE

Water: While the temperatures are cooler and the rains likely to come more often, watering may remain part of your late summer routine, especially if dry conditions continue. Nikolic isn't a proponent of completely abandoning watering in the summer, as it not only weakens the grass plants, but can also lead to a die-off of the soil biology required for a healthy lawn. It is, however, important to water efficiently.

Tip: About one inch of water per week is recommended to maintain a healthy lawn, and if you're not sure how long it takes to achieve that, use the tuna can trick: Place an empty can on your lawn as you water and time how long it takes your sprinkler to fill it.

Ease off watering as the rains come, and as the ground begins to hold more water over fall and winter, watch for puddles indicating soil compaction. (For more on this, see *Aeration*, below.)

Mowing: Also important for a healthy lawn is the length of the grass plants. The key here? Forget the golf green; a healthy home lawn is generally 2 1/2 to three inches tall. Whether the weather is hot and dry or freezing cold, this length protects the grass crowns and roots, Nikolic says.

"It shields the soil underneath; generally, mowing high gives the grass more area for photosynthesis, and (it helps) to crowd out weeds and moss." (For more on this, see the *"Moss"* section, below.)

Nikolic advises to mow often while the grass grows fast, never to remove more than one third of the grass blade, and to leave the clippings in place. Contrary to common belief, this acts as an organic fertilizer and does not lead to a build-up of thatch. (For more on this, see the *"De-thatching"* section, below.) It's also beneficial to run over some of your fall leaves with the lawnmower and leave them, rather than raking them all off the lawn.

It is essential to keep your lawnmower in good shape and the blades sharp to avoid tearing the grass, which can damage the lawn and increase evaporation.

De-thatching: While power-raking is a common practice, Nikolic isn't a proponent as it tends to injure the grass, creating die-off and thus more thatch. Thick brown thatch is made up of hard, fibrous parts of grass stalks and roots. It is naturally decomposed by fungi, so one solution to thatch is to apply to your lawn a sprinkling of well-rotted compost, which contains those fungi necessary to break down thatch, Nikolic says.

TIP: Wondering how to tell if your mower blades need sharpening? After mowing, take a close look and if the grass tops look frayed, it may be time for some mower maintenance.

WEEDS

Here on the mild West Coast, gardening is possible virtually year-round; unfortunately, that means weeds are also possible virtually year-round, certainly well into fall. It's not all bad, though, as weeds can tell homeowners quite a bit about their lawns and gardens, Nikolic notes. Dandelions, for example, can indicate compaction of the soil.

TIP: As you move across your lawn using a weed-puller to remove tap-rooted weeds such as dandelions and thistle, backfill the hole with finely screened organic compost; it will improve the soil composition and give a little boost to the grass roots.

Another common weed in this area is plantain, which also often shows up in compacted soil, while wet, shady areas are prone to weeds such as buttercup, chickweed, horsetail and thistle. Acidic soils are often home to horsetail and sheep sorrel, which, along with yarrow, can also thrive in dry soils.

Again, a dense and healthy lawn on suitable soil will out-compete most weeds. Unwanted plants will appear where there are bare spots in a sparse lawn. But some "weeds" Nikolic doesn't worry too much about, such as clover, which actually takes nitrogen from the air and fixes it in the soil for other plants to use, she says. "I would just mow it and consider it green," she says.

AERATING

When your soil is heavy with clay and/or compacted, aerating – using a machine to remove plugs of soil to get air to the grass roots – can help lighten it up and improve a lawn's root growth.

Aerating in both fall and spring may be a good idea the first year you're amending the soil conditions, then a regular spring aeration is often sufficient afterward, Nikolic suggests. But while many people think it's best to fill these holes with sand, Nikolic prefers to leave the plugs on top of the lawn to break down, while back-filling with a high-quality screened compost.

Grass roots have two peak growing periods in our climate, first in March and then in late September, so aerating at these times and then adding compost afterward will give the roots a real boost.

SEEDING

If you are going to overseed your lawn this fall, use "Canada Certified No. 1" seed, preferably a mix incorporating a variety of different species and suitable to your yard's conditions. "Make sure you get the right plant for the right place – it's the same for grass," Nikolic advises. And even if you're only tackling a relatively small area, avoid the temptation to spread by hand, she recommends. A mechanical spreader will provide more consistent coverage. After overseeding, sprinkle some compost as a topdressing and make sure the area does not dry out while the grass is germinating.

AND FOR THE SPRING...FERTILIZING

Other than compost, which will strengthen the grass roots, fall is not really the time to fertilize your organic lawn because you don't want to encourage blade growth before the cold weather, Nikolic notes.

In March, after your early spring aeration, top dress with another dose of compost, then you can add an organic fertilizer in later spring to support green shoot growth. Those more familiar with synthetic fertilizers should know that organic fertilizers have naturally lower nitrogen/phosphorous/potassium numbers than chemical fertilizers.

However, higher is not better in this case. "Synthetic fertilizers are often washed out of soils to a significant extent, polluting our waters. Besides, they have been shown to reduce a soil's microbial life – and it is the microbes that transform organic fertilizer into plant food," Nikolic says.

Finally, when buying organic fertilizers, just like your groceries, read the label and make sure the product is indeed "100% certified organic," she advises.



Weeds can reveal a lot about lawn conditions.

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