

## NATURAL LAWN CARE CALENDAR

### Disclaimer

Please keep in mind that the time-frames we offer for the following lawn care calendar are subject to modification based upon our unpredictable Wisconsin weather conditions. In other words, if there is a foot of snow the second week of April, it's okay to wait until you can see your grass to start your seasonal lawn care! ☺

Before starting your natural lawn care program, get your soil tested to identify a baseline measurement for pH and key nutrients. Optimal pH for turf grass is between 6 and 7. Websites such as [www.drgoodearth.com](http://www.drgoodearth.com) offer do-it-yourself soil test kits or you can contact your local extension service. For Milwaukee residents, contact University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Extension Service at [www.uwex.edu](http://www.uwex.edu), 932 South 60th Street, West Allis, WI 53214-3346, 414-290-2400 phone, 414-290-2424 fax, or 800-947-3529 tdd.

### Mid-April

First, rake off winter debris from your lawn so that fertilizer can penetrate down to the soil level. When forsythia and daffodils are in bloom (usually between April 1<sup>st</sup> to April 15<sup>th</sup>), it's time to apply your corn gluten (see [www.hort.iastate.edu](http://www.hort.iastate.edu) for detailed information). For maximum effectiveness: 1) Don't forget to apply it on time; 2) apply at a rate of 20 lbs of corn gluten per 1,000 sq. ft. (two lbs nitrogen/1,000 sq. ft.). Shady areas require less nitrogen, so you can reduce your corn gluten application rate to 10 lbs/1,000 sq. ft. in the shade if you wish. In order to correctly apply corn gluten or any other type of fertilizer, you must know the square footage of each area of your lawn. You can download the [square footage calculation sheet](http://www.healthycommunitiesproject.org) at [www.healthycommunitiesproject.org](http://www.healthycommunitiesproject.org) or simply measure the length x width of each area and then add up all areas for a total square footage. To determine how much corn gluten to apply to each area, use the following equation: square footage of area ÷ 1,000 x 20 = # lbs corn gluten to be applied to area; and 3) to activate corn gluten's ability to inhibit seed germination, apply about a quarter-inch of water immediately after application, then let it dry for a few days. Try to avoid applying it right before an extended rain is forecast, as too much water will reduce its effectiveness. Corn gluten remains present in the soil for about six weeks, so wait a full six weeks after application to over-seed.

### May/June

Pull existing weeds as they appear, preferably before they go to seed to prevent new weeds from germinating. Weeds come out more easily if pulled after watering or a good rain. You can hasten how quickly your weeds counts go down by pulling as many as possible at the beginning of your natural lawn care program.

### Memorial Day

The last weekend of May is the best time to over-seed your lawn. The following steps will maximize your efforts and increase your lawn's soil health and structure at the same time:

Step 1: Pull any remaining weeds to prevent further propagation.

Step 2: Aeration. Aerating the average lawn only takes about half an hour, so consider renting a core aerator (Home Depot rents them for about \$45.00 per half a day) with your neighbors and splitting the cost to make it more economical. Aeration relieves compaction, opens up your lawn's root system to oxygen and nutrients and makes room for roots to expand. Because aeration is fairly stressful to your lawn, it only needs to be done every few years.

Step 3: Over-seed and patch bare spots. Apply top quality grass seed that is right for the conditions, i.e. high traffic, sun, or shade. You may need to purchase different mixes for the various areas of your yard. Now is also the time to patch bare spots. Loosen existing soil and add more soil if necessary, heavily apply grass seed and stir up a bit, apply a thin layer of compost over the seed (just enough to cover the seed), and then a thin layer of hay. Compost adds vital nutrients which improve germination, and the hay helps retain moisture and prevents seeds from washing away. Keep

these areas moist but not soaked for a full 30 days for the most successful germination. Your grass seed may look like it has fully germinated after two weeks, but remember that there are several grass varieties in each blend, some of which germinate faster than others.

Step 4: Top-dress with compost. Now is a great time to apply compost to your lawn (1/8 to 1/4 inch layer). Compost improves soil structure, increases organic material and adds micro-organisms which process organic material and produce nutrients for your lawn. These nutrients improve seed germination, so applying compost right after over-seeding maximizes germination and helps establish healthy new grass. You may also want to apply a low-nutrient organic fertilizer at this point to add key nutrients for the summer season.

### **June, July, August**

Follow a one inch/week watering rule (water in early morning or early evening to minimize evaporation) and be sure to incorporate rainfall into the one inch/week rule. To keep track of how much water your lawn receives, keep a rain gauge or straight edged bowl in your garden. The first few times you water, keep track of how long it takes for the water gauge to get to one inch of water. Eventually, you'll have a good idea of how long to water to reach one inch. Remember that different sprinklers apply water at different rates, so get to know each one. Keep pulling those weeds before they go to seed. Along with using corn gluten, this will jump start your weed reduction plan. The number of weeds you have to pull will be minimal after a couple of seasons.

### **Late August**

When the temperatures begin to cool, grass and weeds come out of their semi-dormant state and begin to grow more quickly again. If you choose to apply corn gluten, now is the optimal time for your second application.

### **Labor Day**

Optional: If you have not already aerated and/or over-seeded in late May and feel your lawn would benefit from over-seeding, now is a good time to do so. Do not apply corn gluten if you over-seed as it will prevent your grass seed from properly germinating. Instead, forgo the corn gluten and wait until mid-October to apply a second application of organic fertilizer if your soil test recommends it.

### **Mid-October**

The season is almost over, but there are a few important steps you can take to keep your soil and lawn healthy. Even if you've applied corn gluten in April and late August, your lawn will benefit from an end-of-season application of an organic fertilizer. Keep in mind that the most important nutrient to add at this point is potassium (K), which helps promote resiliency and good spring growth.

### **End-of-Season Tips**

An easy and FREE way to add compost to your lawn every fall is to mow it with the fallen leaves left on it. Mow over the entire lawn a couple of times and then rake up the larger pieces as usual. The small pieces work their way to the soil layer and will serve as food for microorganisms over the winter, which in turn convert that food to nutrients for your grass. Compost also has a very low N-P-K ratio as well (about 1:1:1), which can be counted as part of your winterizing fertilization. Consider mowing over your leaf pile a few times and spreading the material around your ornamentals, perennials and roses for added winter protection and nutrients. At the very end of the season, mow grass to two inches to avoid winter damage and snow mold.