

Fraser Davis' Healthy Lawn Tips

The strategy behind a healthy lawn is to improve the health of the soil. With fertile soil, turf grasses suited to our climate will succeed without the use of toxic chemicals. Since most weeds thrive in barren, compacted soil, we need to increase the soil's organic content and biological diversity. The use of petroleum based chemicals kills the beneficial organisms that make the soil fertile. Therefore, chemically treated lawns can never sustain themselves and require constant chemical applications. The following lawn care practices will help you to transition to a healthy lawn and break the pesticide/herbicide addiction. An environmentally responsible lawn care company should adhere to similar practices.

SEPTEMBER: Test Soil to determine whether or not your soil needs fertilizer and/or lime. Fill a couple of sandwich bags with soil samples from your lawn and take it to Southern States and they will send it away for soil analysis or mail sample to the State Soil Testing Lab at Virginia Tech using their instructions: <https://www.soiltest.vt.edu/sampling-instructions.html> .

Core Aerate to alleviate compaction and allow oxygen to enter the soil, thereby allowing the beneficial microbes to thrive.

Compost to improve the population of microorganisms in the soil. Spread 1/4" layer of very finely textured compost on the lawn. This is available at [Yard Works](#) on Patterson Avenue (804) 360-0311. They will blow it on your lawn or you can rake it over the lawn yourself. Compost teas are available online. Or spread your own homemade compost.

Over-seed with a mix of Tall fescues for a sunny lawn and a mix of Tall, Chewning's and Creeping Red fescue for shady areas. These are the turf grasses that are suited to our climate in Richmond, VA. Southern States sells Blue and Gold label seed that has 0% weed content. Project Green (804) 299-5322 will sell you the turf grass blend that they have custom-mixed for our area.

OCTOBER: Fertilize your lawn with an organic source of nitrogen in mid-October. An average lawn requires between 3 and 4 lbs. of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet annually. Do not apply more than .9 lb. per 1,000 sf per season. Any more will not be absorbed by the soil and will end up in our groundwater, streams and rivers and will cause environmental damage and pollute our drinking water. Apply .9 lb. per 1,000 sf in the fall, .9 lb. per 1,000 sf in the spring (March/April) and .9 lb. per 1,000 sf in early June. Use an organic nitrogen fertilizer like Safer Brand's Ringer Lawn Restore (available at Home Depot and online). It also includes potassium to help with root growth. If your lawn is composed of 5% white clover (which fixes nitrogen from the atmosphere), the clover will provide your lawn with 2 lbs. of nitrogen per year. Keeping the clippings on the lawn after mowing will also deliver 2 lbs of nitrogen annually in addition to delivering phosphorous and potassium. If you have both clover and grass clippings, you will not need to fertilize.

Lime in late October at least two weeks after applying nitrogen. Lawns require a pH between 5.5 and 7.0. Our soils tend to be more acidic, and so an annual application of lime is usually required.

Weed control is the most difficult obstacle when going organic. Corn gluten has been used as a pre-emergent weed killer with mixed reviews. Hand-weeding and spot-spraying with a vinegar/citrus oil mix are two other options. If a large weed infestation occurs, you may need to resort to an emergency chemical application. I would recommend calling Project Green (www.projectgreenva.com) in the event of a weed infestation as they will take care of it in the most environmentally responsible way possible.

Transitioning to a healthy lawn is not simple. Take it from someone who tried going cold turkey and abandoned all chemicals at once. I do not recommend this approach. Instead, gradually taper your lawn's reliance on chemicals while improving the health of your soil. It may take a year or two to get your soil healthy enough to support your healthy lawn. Project Green or one of the other DCR's 'Green and Clean' certified lawn companies can help you with this transition. If you want to try it on your own, a great on-line resource for information about organic lawn and garden care is the website Beyond Pesticides, www.beyondpesticides.org.