the good lawn guide

All you need to know for a healthy, green lawn

Turn over for easy-to-follow advice on getting the ideal lawn for your garden
Welcome

No matter how small your garden, the chances are it will have a patch of grass, even if you don’t think it deserves to be called a lawn.

Grass is the universal ground cover plant, and a lawn covers a large proportion of many gardens. It is the easiest way to look after large areas of your garden, and the cheapest!

A good lawn can set off the rest of your garden perfectly, making your flower beds look great and it is somewhere to entertain the kids, relax and even practise your putting!

But lawns are often the cause of stress and worry because so many minor things can go wrong. Moss, weeds, yellow patches, and even the family dog all seem intent on ruining your efforts but grass is resilient and will usually recover, given a chance.

A few simple tasks, done now, will prepare your lawn for summer and regular maintenance will help keep it in good condition all year.

The most important tasks are mowing and feeding – after that you can think about controlling weeds and moss and changing your good lawn to a great lawn.

The lawn year starts now and this guide will help you get the lawn you want this summer, whether you already have a great lawn, have inherited a mess or feel the need to start a new one.

Get your lawn sorted and the rest of the garden will all fall into place.

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moving into a new house and finding a neglected lawn can be a worry. Should you start again? Should you try to improve what you have or should you cover it with concrete? If your grass is bumpy and mostly weeds and you want an immaculate lawn, then it may be best to start again from new. That means a lot of work and is possibly expensive, so improving what you already have is worth trying.

What to do
There are two things you can do that will quickly convert scruffy, grass into healthy lawn, with minimal cost and effort. Then you can do a lot more to fine tune the results. If you have many weeds then grass, a lawn weedkiller will help you on your way. But feeding and mowing are the most important things you can do to get your lawn looking good.

How mowing works
Grass is a special plant. The growing point is low down, at soil level. So if you chop the top off, it sends up new leaves. If you keep chopping the top off most other plants they die. Grass is different. But even so, cutting off the leaves again and again will weaken it, especially if you cut all the leaves off, which happens if you mow too low. Endless cutting without adding some fertiliser will weaken the grass.

Leaving the clippings on the lawn puts back some of these nutrients but the dead leaves make a layer called thatch that smothers the base of the grass plants and encourages moss. Clippings also contain weed seeds – which then give you a worse weed problem. Mulching mowers overcome these problems by chopping the clippings finely and blowing them deep into the base of the turf. A few mostly low, spreading weeds also have the capacity to survive mowing. That is why you get dandelions, plantains and daisies in your lawn and not nettles or poppies – they cannot survive constant chopping.

Why it pays to feed
Grass is also a hungry plant – it needs lots of nitrogen. If the soil is poor, there are grasses that will survive, but not the lush, green grasses we want for our lawn. But lots of weeds can survive poor soil. Clover can collect nitrogen from the air so it can grow in poor soil with few nutrients and replace the grass. Dandelions and plantains have deep roots that search out nutrients and other plants can thrive on a meagre diet. So without feeding, grass grows thin and weak and cannot win the battle for space with the weeds. Give the grass fertiliser and it spreads out and grows strongly and takes up the space the weeds want.

So regular feeding will make your grass grow well and help it squeeze out the weeds.

WHAT GRASS FEEDS ON
You want your grass to be green and lush so lawn fertiliser is rich in nitrogen, the nutrient that encourages leafy growth. The exception is autumn lawn food which is higher in phosphorus and potassium. Nitrates that encourage roots and hardness to help the turf survive winter.

Feeding and mowing are the two most important things you can do to get your lawn looking good.

GET THE RIGHT FERTILISER
Any feed is better than none but not all fertilisers are the same. There are three types of lawn fertiliser – liquid lawn feeds, granular feeds for spring and summer and autumn feeds. In addition there are fertilisers that combine feeds and mosskillers. Liquid fertilisers are cheap and quick. You will see the lawn green up in just a few days. But the effect is shortlived and you need to reapply every few weeks. Modern granular fertilisers tend to have slow-release nitrogen and usually feed for six to eight weeks. Autumn feeds stimulate root growth and prepare the turf for winter.
Making a new lawn

There are two ways to start a new lawn: from seed or from turf. Both will give you a beautiful lawn but which way is best for you will depend on how long you want to wait and how skilled you are at gardening.

Before you start, think about your needs and how much time you want to spend creating, waiting for and looking after your lawn. Whichever you choose, you must prepare the soil well in advance. Then make sure you choose the right grass seed or turf for your needs – and that does not always mean the best, or the most expensive.

Preparation

We have all seen turf laid around new houses. Often there is little soil preparation and the turf is used for little more than to cover up any rubbish and rubble laying around. This is not good practice and it always leads to failure and disappointment because:

- The compacted soil does not drain so the grass gets waterlogged.
- Perennial weeds grow through the turf, competing with the grass.
- The turf does not root properly in the compacted soil.
- Buried rubbish with thin soil causes the grass to die of drought.
- Subsequent sinking of loose soil causes hollows in the turf.

To avoid this you should dig or rotavate the soil well, then level it and rake it so it is even. Get rid of large stones, perennial weeds and large roots. Then walk over the soil, shuffling your feet, so the whole area is firmed, rake and level again and you are ready to sow or lay turf.

This may seem a lot of work but you only want to make your new lawn once – so it pays to get it right.

Why choose turf?

The results are almost instant – though it will take several months before you can use your new lawn for ball games.

- Turf is more expensive and heavier to handle than seed.
- You must use it within a few days of delivery and it must be kept moist.
- The choice of turf types is more limited than seed mixes.

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Why choose seed?

- Growing a new lawn from seed is convenient – it arrives in a box or bag and you don’t have to use it immediately – so you avoid the hassle of laying turf in the rain.
- You can also choose from a wide variety of lawn types, for shade, for hardwearing lawns and for fine lawns.
- Depending on the type of seed you buy, a lawn from seed can be much cheaper than the same size from turf.

What to remember

- Despite the advantages, there are problems with a lawn from seed. You can’t sow it all year round – April and September are the best times.
- A lawn also takes much longer to establish than turf and you will need to care for it in the early months and mow it carefully. In addition, birds will eat some seeds and cats and other animals will use the fine soil for all sorts of activities.
- You must keep the soil surface moist at all times as the seed germinates or it will die before it gets established.
- You will not be able to use the lawn for at least three months after sowing.
- Another problem is weeds – because weed seeds will grow just as fast as the grass seeds. This can look alarming when instead of a lawn you have an expanse of groundsel and chickweed. But it is not as bad as it at first, looks. Remember that the grass will tolerate mowing but the weeds – or most of them – will die when they get their heads chopped off. Even so, the best way to avoid this is to use the stale seedbed technique.
- This means preparing the soil for sowing and watering it in dry weather, and letting the weeds grow. Then spray them off with a contact weedkiller. A week later you can gently hoe and rake the soil surface and sow your grass. The idea is that many of the weed seeds in the surface will have grown and been killed so your lawn seed has less competition. It’s a good idea but it adds a month to your lawn preparation time.
The great invasion

They say that spring is here when you can stand on half a dozen daisies, but for many gardeners that is not a welcome thought.

There are two types of gardener: those that want an immaculate, weed-free lawn and those that can tolerate or even welcome a few weeds.

Why you should control weeds

If you like blue speedwell, white daisies and dandelions in your lawn you will have an easier life than if you decide to wage war on weeds. Simple feeding and regular mowing will go a long way to reducing weeds in your lawn.

Manual control

Some weeds can be dug out of the lawn effectively, although it can be a slow job. If you dig out large clumps of weeds you will need to sow grass seed to fill the voids or more weeds will move in.

Chemical control

Most gardeners use a weed and feed product to control their lawn weeds – it saves time and most work reasonably well. But they are most effective on rosette-forming weeds and large-leaved weeds. They are less effective against small-leaved weeds. For these, use a liquid weedkiller that ‘sticks’ to the leaves better. Using a separate weedkiller also means you can treat small, specific areas of lawn that are infested. Always use a ‘selective’ lawn weedkiller and never a general weedkiller such as glyphosate which will kill the grass too.

WEEDY GRASSES

Lawn weedkillers work because they only affect broadleaved plants and they have little or no effect on grasses. So when you get a coarse grass in your lawn you cannot use chemicals. Coarse grasses are such a problem because they grow much faster than your lawn and they are often a different colour. So they show up even after you have cut your lawn and a week later they stick out like a sore thumb, much taller than the lawn grass. There are two ways to control them. You can either dig them out and reseed the patches or you can slash them with criss-cross cuts so they die out.

The other common lawn weed grass is annual meadow grass. This usually sprouts in autumn and produces flowering heads low down in spring and then seeds and dies, leaving dead bare patches. It is usually only a problem in poor, patchy lawns either because of overhead shade or dryness in summer. If you reseed the patches with grass seed and feed and water your lawn you can usually eliminate it.

DANDELIONS

Dandelions spread by seed so make sure you mow them off before the flowers turn to seed heads. The roots also re-sprout if you leave some in the ground when you dig them up. Granular weed killers and weed and feed products such as Evergreen Complete control dandelions very effectively.

DAISIES

Daisies form large clumps in lawns, spreading on the surface, crowding out the grass. They spread by seed if you allow them to flower and set seed. Small, isolated clumps can be dug out but large areas are better treated with a lawn weedkiller. Daisies are not a real problem weed and are relatively easy to control.

PENDING WITHE

Daisy-like white flowers that look like weeds but are not. They can be dug out of the lawn and reseeded.

Dandelions...
For many, mowing is a Sunday chore or something the neighbours do to blight summer evenings. But mowing is the most important thing we can do to keep our lawns healthy and beautiful.

**Benefits of mowing**

Without mowing, lawn grasses would all compete with each other and get tall, and flower. The base of the grass will become dead and yellow and, in the damp shade, moss will grow. You discover this for yourself if you plant bulbs in grass and cannot cut it for several months. When you do cut the long grass you are left with a straw-coloured lawn. But consequential, regular mowing encourages new growth from the base, the lawn greens up and all is well after a few months. But this weakens the grass and those weeks while the lawn is yellow and bare are when weeds move in. Fine lawn grasses – the ones that make the neatest lawns – cannot survive this treatment, so regular mowing, taking off a little at a time, is the way to keep your lawn healthy – and that can mean mowing twice a week in early summer.

**When to mow**

We usually have to mow when we have time but ideally mow when the grass is dry and not when it is wet or covered in dew. Wheels and rollers are less likely to slip and the grass will pack better in the grass box. Never use an electric mower in rain or when the grass is wet and don’t mow in frosty conditions.

**How to mow**

If you have a cylinder mower with a roller it is best to alternate the direction of mowing every time you mow to avoid forming ridges in the lawn but this is not as important with smaller, lighter mowers. In spring and in dry weather, raise the height of the blades so you do not cut too low. Never allow the grass to grow long and then scalp it – that will weaken the turf.

**Grass clippings**

Grass clippings on the compost heap create a brown, slimy mass but you can mix them with shredded paper to make good compost. Or use them as a mulch around shrubs and vegetables – as long as you have not just used a weedkiller.

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**Cylinder**

The greenkeeper’s choice, cylinder mowers cut rather than slash the grass for a perfect finish. But they cost more and need careful maintenance to keep them working well. You can get petrol, electric and push models.

**Rotary**

Quick and efficient, rotary mowers have few working parts so are cheaper to make and maintain. Some are powered so you don’t have to push. Wheels make height adjustment easy but not so easy to mow up to border edges.

**Hover**

The ‘go anywhere’ mower that floats on a cushion of air. Easy to move in all directions as you mow and good for rough areas of ground where a cylinder mower would be damaged. Generally the cheapest mowers and easy to use.
Quick & easy lawn repairs

DAMAGED EDGES
Where border plants have flopped over lawn edges or stepping on the edge has broken it, action is needed to keep the edge neat. Act now for quick results.

1. The easiest solution is to cut out a square of turf and turn it round so the broken or dead area is moved from the edge. Start by cutting round the affected area, as evenly as possible.

2. Use a spade to cut under the turf as evenly as you can – this will make it easier to turn and replace the turf. Lift the turf and turn it 180 degrees, lining up the new edge carefully.

3. Fill the gap with compost or fork over the bare patch and sow grass seed over the patch. Water well. Keep off the area for at least a month if possible until the turf roots.

LUMPS AND BUMPS
A lumpy lawn not only spoils your garden cricket or football, it also makes it difficult to mow and leads to bare patches where the raised areas are scalped, especially by rotary mowers. Hollows can be filled by adding good quality compost or topsoil, in spring or autumn. Only add about 1cm (½in) at a time, to avoid smothering the grass.

High areas are best tackled by cutting an ‘H’ shape in the turf and peeling it back, forking over the soil and removing some of the soil before replacing the turf. Firm it and water it well.

BARE PATCHES
Excessive wear, compacted soil, dog urine and squashed worm casts can all leave you with bare patches on the lawn. But they are not difficult to repair if you act now.

1. Rake out the dead grass and fork over the soil lightly. Sprinkle some grass seed evenly over the surface and rake it in to mix it with the soil. Water thoroughly and keep moist at all times.

2. To prevent birds eating the seeds and encourage speedy germination, cover the patch with fleece or plastic film until the seeds start to grow. Make wire pegs with old coat hangers to secure.

MOSS
Moss thrives in conditions that grass hates. So if your lawn is soggy, dries out badly in summer, is starved or in deep shade, moss will thrive and grass will struggle.

Moss killers turn the moss black but they will not prevent more moss growing and will not eliminate the dead moss. So you need to rake it out after it is killed.

To prevent moss growing again you need to change the conditions. Aerate the soil with a fork to improve drainage and feed the lawn to encourage healthy grass growth. Regular light raking will remove thatch (dead grass) and allow the grass to thrive. You may not be able to reduce shade, in which case your lawn will never be as good as it could be in sun.

Garden Answers – The Good Lawn Guide

In association with EverGreen

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Turn over for A lawn Year guide
MARCH
- Rake the lawn to remove dead moss and start mowing with the blades set high for the first couple of cuts.
- Gradually lower the blades with each cut.
- Allow bulb foliage to develop in naturalised lawns.

APRIL
- Feed the lawn with a spring/summer fertiliser to encourage healthy, green growth.
- Mow regularly to keep the lawn in trim. Any isolated patches of tough weeds can be re-seeded.
- This is the ideal time to start a new lawn from seed or turf.

MAY
- As weeds start to grow use a liquid lawn weed killer, or remove large weeds by hand.
- Trim the lawn edges around beds and borders.
- Gradually lower the blades with each cut.
- Mow frequently – up to twice a week.

JUNE
- Mow little and often while the grass is growing so fast.
- Check areas seeded in spring and if the weather is dry water the new grass to help it establish.
- Apply weedkiller to isolated patches of tough weeds but keep soil moist.
- Give liquid lawn feed.

JULY
- If the weather turns hot and dry, ease back a little on mowing and lift the height of cut slightly to help keep the grass green.
- If weather is wet, apply lawn fertiliser or weedkiller.
- Prevent border plants spilling onto lawn edges and killing the grass.

AUGUST
- Even though the grass may slow right down at this time of the year, occasionally trim it to prevent seeds heads developing.
- Water in dry weather if needed and there is no water use restriction.

SEPTEMBER
- Sow grass seed to give it time to establish before winter.
- Cooler nights and dewy weather starts grass to grow again so carry on mowing.
- Gradually raise the blades with each cut.
- Brush off worm casts.

OCTOBER
- Control moss, scarify and apply an autumn lawn fertiliser to get the lawn in good condition for the winter.
- Lay turf.
- Rake or blow leaves off.
- Aerate the lawn to improve surface drainage.

Low maintenance lawn care
Q I have a holiday home in Cornwall that I visit at weekends. Unfortunately I can’t get my lawn looking its best because I can’t always mow it each week. With the lawn feed I’ve seen, you need to leave a few days after mowing before you can put it down. Is there something else I can use to green up my lawn and keep it in good condition?
A Evergreen Cut & Feed can be applied immediately after mowing and gives results in just three days so you will see a fresh, green lawn on your next visit. It continues feeding the lawn for up to six weeks and is simple to apply. Another benefit is that there is no need to water in because of its no-soak formula.

Mowing less often
Q I’ve got into the habit of regularly feeding my lawn and it looks great. But it grows so much I have to mow it frequently. I’d rather not spend my free time mowing, so is there anything I can do to avoid it?
A Regular feeding is necessary to make the lawn healthy and withstand wear but it need not mean lots more mowing. Evergreen Mow It Less keeps your lawn healthy and results show in just three days. The slow-growth formula means 50% less mowing than with other lawn care products. Plus it continues feeding for up to six weeks. You can even apply it after cutting.

Weed control
Q I’ve just moved into a house with a large garden and, for the first time, I have lawns. I’d like to improve it but have no idea what to do. Please can you help me?
A For seasonal advice on feeding, watering and controlling weeds and problems visit www.lovethegarden.com/lawns.

Quick results needed
Q We have a lot of barbecues and I enjoy making the garden look lovely. But I never have enough time to take care of the lawn. Is there anything that gives quick results?
A Evergreen Complete is a 4-in-1 lawn care product that feeds, weeds, controls moss and supports your lawn’s resistance to drought. Moss starts to turn brown in seven days. For best results use it every six weeks. Evergreen Complete costs £7.99/10 patches – £22.99/360m².

Patchy grass
Q My kids love to play football but they wear patches in the lawn. In previous years I’ve put grass seed down but it quickly gets worn away again. There are also bare areas under trees where the grass just won’t grow. What can I do to mend the patches and help the grass grow?
A You should try Miracle-Gro Patch Magic. This is a 3-in-1 patching mix that contains grass seed, Miracle-Gro plant food and compost. The special compost expands to encase and protect the seeds so the grass will grow anywhere, even in difficult well-trodden areas. Even better, the grass starts to grow in just one week. Miracle-Gro Patch Magic costs £9.99/10 patches – £24.99/16m².