

IS THE GRASS REALLY GREENER...?

BY Sue Becker, Virginia Cooperative Extension Master Gardener, Bedford County



For those of you who think the grass is greener on the other side, well, sometimes it just is! August through early October are the perfect months to start getting your lawn back into shape! For the majority of us, this may mean some basic maintenance, for others, not so much! Doing a little research up front can save you time, money, and a lot of hair pulling.

Growing a lawn in Virginia can be frustrating to say the least! We live in what is known as the transition zone for turf grasses, a little too hot, a little too cold! Warm season grasses, such as Zoysia grass and Bermuda grass, are better suited to our neighbors in the Southern and Eastern Piedmont and coastal areas. While this may encompass some areas of Bedford County, the majority of us grow cool season grasses. A customized blend of tall or thin leaf fescues, Kentucky bluegrass, and perennial ryegrasses are best tailored to the Northern Piedmont, the Ridge, and Mountain localities. These grasses are at their best when the air and soil temperatures are cooler but suffer, often going dormant, during heat and drought. Blending these grasses, matching growth and leaf traits, help your

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lawn tolerate sun/shade patterns, pests, diseases, and weather extremes, somewhat solving your “Three Bears” dilemma. Planting that grass seed in the fall gives it plenty of time to establish throughout the winter, growing healthy roots to withstand the trials of summer.

If you haven't had a soil test in two or three years, do it this year. This is important because it will tell you what soil amendments you might need, if any at all. Remember the whole time and money thing? Without the proper pH, somewhere between 6.2 and 6.5, your grass can't take up the nutrients it needs. The old adage that you can never lime too much is wrong. Following the fertilizer and amendment recommendations on the soil test results in better success and less run-off into our waterways. While you're at it, spring for the extra \$4.00 to measure the organic matter in your lawn. Our clay soils don't allow for much movement of air, water, nutrients, or root growth. Tilling in 6-8" of organic material such as compost is better done at the very beginning of lawn establishment. For already up and going lawns, core-aeration is recommended every year. An aerator, a machine used to punch holes all through the lawn, improves oxygen, fertilizer, lime, and root growth through the soil. This is also a good time to over-seed those thin spots. Patch dead areas by scratching up or tilling. Aerating in those spaces will make your lawn look like it has had a hair transplant!

Water wisely or don't water at all. Cool season turf grasses need at least one inch of water a week. Water early in the morning to minimize evaporation and disease issues. Watering deeply once a week helps establish deep roots. If you can't do that consistently throughout the hot summer you are better off letting the grass go dormant and wait for cooler days. For those of you with irrigation systems, watch how much water is going into your landscape beds. Often trees and shrubs can be way overwatered, making them vulnerable to root rots. Proper mowing will help keep those grass roots cool and healthy. Cut often at 3 1/2 to 4 inches. Let those clippings lie as they are free food for your lawn.

Which brings us to the age-old dilemma of weeds, pests and diseases. If you are trying to create the perfect lawn by killing off every weed in sight, you are in for a very long and frustrating go. The Virginia Tech Weed Identification Guide <http://oak.ppws.vt.edu/weedindex.htm> is a great place to start. You have a plethora of choices facing you so determine what the problem is before you treat for it. Following best practices for lawn care will

help keep your plants and soil healthy thus diminishing the need for herbicides. For additional horticultural questions or concerns, contact the VCE Bedford County Master Gardener Help Desk at 540 586-7675 or bedfordmg@vt.edu .

For those of you who would like more information on best practices for basic lawn care and maintenance, sign up for the Fall 2014 Bedford County Library Seminar “I FOUGHT THE LAWN AND THE LAWN WON!”. This FREE program will be presented at all Bedford County libraries beginning Saturday, August 23rd. While it is not necessary to pre-register, it is recommended. To register for the seminars, call or sign up at your local Bedford County library (see dates, times listed below) or the Bedford County VCE office (540) 586-7675.

MONTVALE LIBRARY (540) 425-7006
Saturday, August 23rd @ 11:00am-12:30

BIG ISLAND LIBRARY (540) 425-7000
Tuesday, September 2nd @ 1:00pm-2:30pm

MONETA/SML LIBRARY (540) 425-7004
Thursday, September 4th @ 6:30pm-8:00pm

FOREST LIBRARY (540) 425-7002
Saturday, September 6 @ 11:00am-12:30pm

BEDFORD MAIN LIBRARY (540) 586-8911
Tuesday, September 9 @ 11:00am-12:30pm

STEWARTSVILLE LIBRARY (540) 425-7008
Saturday, September 13 @ 11:00am-12:30pm

If you are a person with disability and require any assistive devices, services or other accommodations to participate in this event, contact Scott Baker, VCE-Bedford, at 540.586.7675 (TDD # 800.828.1120) during business hours (8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m.) at least 5 days prior to this event.