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For Immediate Release:

It's Okay to Let Your Lawn Go Dormant

Your Lawn Doesn't Always Have to Be Green to be Healthy

As a homeowner you may feel compelled to keep your lawn looking plush and green throughout the summer, but there is an alternative—you can let your grass go dormant. The Lawn Institute, an organization that specializes in sharing lawn care information with homeowners, offers this information.

During the summer season a growing number of local municipalities across the country are implementing watering restrictions in their effort to conserve water consumption. For some homeowners, these well-intentioned limits may create concern about how such watering bans might affect not only the health but also the beauty of their lawn. It might come as a surprise to many homeowners to discover that their lawn can do quite well without frequent watering. Actually, limited watering can strengthen your lawn.

Brown Grass Is a Natural Part of Dormancy

The fact that your grass has turned brown isn't necessarily something to frown about. Think of dormancy as "Nature's handy work." The Department of Horticulture at the University of Missouri-Columbia offers further assurance that going dormant is part of the natural cycle for grass, "Summer dormancy of grasses is a mechanism that helps a lawn survive." Of course, no one is suggesting that you shouldn't take a few precautions throughout the year to help your grass survive and thrive the dormant stage. The following lawn care suggestions are worthwhile recommendations under normal circumstances, but they are especially beneficial in helping your lawn during dormancy.

- **Soil Testing**

Soil tests provide a means to determine fertility levels which in turn can help you select the proper liming soil pH amendment and fertilization program to obtain optimal growth of your lawn, garden and ornamental plants. Contact your local agricultural extension agent to find out how to take a soil sample, where to send it and how to interpret the information for selecting the appropriate soil amendments.

- **Fertilize**

Fertilizing your lawn with the right balance of nutrients helps your lawn when it goes dormant and it can also help your lawn deal with periods of stress, prevent weeds and minimize the likelihood of insect infestation. Proper fertilizers and weed-and-feed type products can help increase drought-tolerance and provide disease resistance when applied properly.

- **De-Thatch**

Thatch is a build-up of partially decomposed and decaying grass stems, plant crowns, roots and other organic debris that accumulate at the surface of the soil. Healthy lawns need some thatch to help insulate against temperature fluctuations, conserve moisture and add important nutrients to the soil as it decomposes. Excessive thatch (more than ½ inch thick) can create an environment that attracts pests and disease. De-thatching loosens excess debris and provides better surface conditions so air, water and nutrients can enter the soil to nourish the grass plants.

- **Aerify**

Core aeration (the removal of plugs of soil and thatch) can help solve soil compaction problems and encourage a deeper root system and healthier lawn. Whether you aerate the lawn yourself or hire it done, be sure aerators with hollow tines that remove plugs of soil are used instead of the solid tines which actually add to the soil compaction problem, Aerifying your lawn in the spring or fall will also help to maximize the benefits of whatever water is available so that when your lawn does go dormant it experiences less stress.

- **Sharpen Lawnmower Blades**

Don't underestimate the benefits of sharp lawnmower blades when cutting your lawn. When grass is cut evenly with sharp blades, it's less likely to suffer heat damage, attract insects or be prone to disease. Grass cut with a sharp mower blade has less damaged surface area, allowing it to heal faster with less stress.

Another mowing tip concerns mowing height. Set your lawnmower blade higher when warm weather approaches or when it appears your lawn is going dormant. Although the recommended height of cutting depends on the type of grass in question, a good rule of thumb is to set your mower blade to remove one-third of the grass leaf's length. Another consideration is to mow at a height of between three to three and one-half inches—anything less than 2-1/2 inches is discouraged.

- **Water Management**

When given a choice, apply water to your lawn early in the day. One of the most accurate, simple and cheapest ways to measure the amount of water being applied is the “tuna can” method. Simply distribute a half-dozen empty tuna cans around your lawn to catch water; then run your sprinkler for 15 minutes and measure the depth of water and adjust your sprinkler time accordingly. The “tuna can” method is also an excellent way to determine the consistency of your sprinkler system's water disbursement.

By implementing some very basic care procedures such core aeration, removing excess thatch, applying appropriate amounts of fertilizer and other practices you can take comfort in knowing that your lawn will spring back as strong and healthy as ever when the rain begins to fall again.

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