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For Immediate Release:

Advice on Creating a Low Maintenance Lawn

What a wonderful world it would be if we could discover the lawn grass that stayed green year-round, never had to be watered, fertilized, or sprayed and only occasionally mowed. While the cruel side of Mother Nature probably won't ever allow such a thing to happen, there is a lot that we can do now to come closer to that low maintenance lawn.

While a fortunate few homeowners who are just starting to establish a lawn can come closest to a low maintenance lawn, even the majority of people who have to contend with a lawn planted well before they bought the house and yard can gain some advantages.

From The Ground Up

Low maintenance lawns begin with almost compulsive attention to the site's soil and most likely the need for its improvement. For new lawns an essential first step is soil testing followed by incorporating whatever amendments are called for to create the proper pH and physical characteristics. For existing lawns, the only practical way to modify the soil is with seasonally repeated aeration and light top-dressing with high quality compost or other soil-test-determined amendments. Without good soil, even high maintenance lawns will have problems.

Good soils accept and retain moisture, while allowing adequate drainage and providing sufficient air space to permit roots to penetrate, absorb moisture and nutrients and exchange gases. To the degree that the soil can be improved, the lawn's overall maintenance will be reduced. Conversely, the poorer the soil, i.e., compacted clay or 100 percent sand, the more the lawn will require energy, effort and maintenance, in the forms of water, fertilizer and pesticides. Yet, high maintenance in poor soils will return only high levels of frustration.

Selecting the Right Grass

After soil preparation, the next step is to understand and recognize the need to balance desires for low maintenance with the actual uses that the lawn will have. Growing prize-winning roses in a battlefield is impractical, so too is hoping for a low maintenance lawn that must endure high traffic use. For example, in cool-season areas, fine fescues (hard, chewings and red creeping) are generally recognized as low maintenance grasses, compared with many varieties of bluegrass. But, if the lawn is subject to heavy use, fescues don't have the capacity to recover from wear as rapidly as bluegrasses. So the low maintenance advantages and slow recovery disadvantages of fescues would each have to be weighed against each other. Which is better, re-seeding and restricting traffic on a fescue lawn, or going with bluegrass and achieving reduced maintenance in other ways?

In selecting a grass specie and variety for a low maintenance lawn, search-out those that have undergone multi-year tests for water and fertilizer requirements, plus consider more strongly those grasses that contain beneficial fungi called endophytes. Present in ryegrasses and fescues, but not yet in bluegrasses, endophytes offer increased resistance to surface feeding insects and seem to better tolerate heat, drought and many diseases. As turfgrass breeders expand their knowledge and abilities, expect to see more grasses with endophytes in the future.

Turfgrass sod producers, whose business success depends on satisfied customers, spend a great deal of time reviewing the special attributes of new grasses and their suitability to the producer's climate before determining which they will select for their sod fields. Homeowners can choose to do their own seed selection research, or utilize the expertise of a sod producer and gain an instant lawn. While the initial cost for sod will be higher than seed, the establishment routines required for seeded lawns are far from being a low maintenance process.

Maximize the Return on Every Effort

Compared to the hand-weeding, watering, fertilizing and spraying that most flower beds or vegetable gardens require, a sound argument can be made that on a square-foot for square-foot basis, lawns are naturally a low maintenance landscape feature, they simply take up more square-footage. But moving beyond that potentially endless argument, homeowners striving for a low maintenance lawn should try to maximize the return on every bit of time and energy they expend on their lawn.

Low Maintenance Lawn Tips

Here are some tips every homeowner can use to increase the return on their lawn maintenance investment:

1. Water as early in the morning as possible, when winds are calmest and temperatures lowest.

2. Water only when the lawn is dry and then apply an amount that will soak in deeply.

3. If there is an in-ground sprinkler system, adjust it to the seasonal needs of the grass plant, don't just "set it and forget it."

4. Mow frequently enough so just the top third of the blade is removed, and leave the clippings on the lawn. (Clippings provide nutrients, a small amount of moisture and do not contribute to thatch.)

5. Fertilize when the grass plant can use the nutrients. For cool season grasses that would be in early spring (when soil temperatures are 50-degrees or higher) and late fall. For warm season grasses, fertilize lightly through the peak-growing season during the summer. Avoid fertilizers that are not slow-release or those with a very high percentage of nitrogen because that leads to more mowing.

6. Apply pesticides only to those areas that require them. Weeds can be pulled or spot-sprayed. A dense, vigorously growing lawn will crowd out weeds and be able to out-grow many insect and disease problems, so one of the benefits of proper low maintenance lawn care is that many of the high maintenance jobs of spraying insecticides, herbicides and fungicides won't be necessary.

Finally, while low maintenance lawns can be every bit as beautiful as high maintenance lawns for much of the year, the stresses of summer heat and drought can cause them to go dormant, particularly if water is not applied. No one hangs leaves on their deciduous trees after autumn, because it's an accepted part of nature. Why then should a homeowner attempt to keep a low maintenance lawn dark green during the heat of summer, when the grass plant's natural tendency is to be less active and somewhat dormant?

When temperatures start to drop and fall rains increase, the low maintenance lawn will recover, particularly if it's been started in good soil and treated properly the rest of the year.

You don't have to decrease the grass area to have a low maintenance lawn, just cut down the unnecessary and unproductive maintenance habits that have become all too common.

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