

# Not Too Late to Talk About Lawn Care

by Reeve Hobbie

Spring has come quickly this year and most every growing thing is ahead of schedule, but I'm behind, at least in writing and posting of this article about our lawns.

However, since lawn care should be an ongoing concern, I'm going to talk about it in the next eight or so paragraphs. Hundreds of homes in our Balcones Village/Spicewood Homeowners Association area have carpet grass known as St. Augustine. It's wide bladed, tolerates heat and shade, but demands more water than most other grass choices.

## **Can you say that your St. Augustine grass is looking as healthy as it once looked?**

Most of you reading this article are probably saying "No." There may be any number of reasons why. Let me walk you through likely issues.

First, you probably have denser shade over your lawn today than you used to have. Let's face it, each year our trees get bigger than they have ever been before and thus are producing more shade. Shade is the enemy of all grass varieties, even shade-tolerant St. Augustine. Tree branches could be thinned out and raised up to allow more light in. A certified arborist could help you here. However, now through the end of June is not the right time to prune trees (see previous article), so hold off until July.

Second, have you aeriated your lawn recently? What little soil we have, readily compacts. Loosening it will allow the grass rhizomes (below ground) and stolons (above ground) to spread with greater ease. Top dressing with a light soil or compost is another approach provided it is applied very thin (about a half an inch) over existing growing grass. It's best to top dress in late winter or early spring.

Third, are you applying the right fertilizer for your lawn's needs? Only a soil test can tell you what your grass really needs. A general lawn fertilizer has a 3-1-2 ratio of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium that is typically good for a new lawn. Most of our lawns have been around a while and may have an excess of some of those nutrients. My own recent soil test showed I had a surplus of phosphorous and potassium. Other folks have surprising results too. I am now applying nitrogen only because that's all my grass

needs. The right fertilizer should be applied in April and perhaps again in September or October, but never with a weed killer in it. That has to be a separate procedure.

Fourth, might your lawn have a disease or other problem? St. Augustine grass is susceptible to many ailments and often, once weakened, is prone to several at the same time. Here's a partial list of the plagues: white grub worms, chinch bugs, St. Augustine decline, Take-all Patch, Brown Patch, Nitrogen deficiency. The list goes on. Diagnosing your lawns problem won't be easy. My suggestion is that you turn to the internet and view pictures and read descriptions that seem most like yours. Sometimes there are natural treatments and almost always chemical treatments available for each.

### **So what can I do about my St. Augustine lawn this late in spring?**

First and foremost, mow your lawn weekly, more frequently if you like, but at least once every seven days. Mow with a high blade setting. There will be more water retention and less thatch if left high. Frequent mowing deters weeds and your St. Augustine grass should eventually prevail.

Water your lawn on a weekly basis unless nature provides us with an inch or more of rain. Only a rain gauge can tell you how much your lawn receives. When you do water, irrigate deeply so that your grass roots want to grow deeper. Perhaps set your sprinkler system to water each lawn zone twice on your designated day.

Fertilize your lawn with the right formulation. Don't guess. If you have a lawn ailment, get it diagnosed and then try to remove the problem. If you have totally bald spots, lay new sod once you know why the former grass died. Was it too much shade, the wrong fertilizer, a heavily trafficked area, Brown Patch, soil compaction, water deficiency, something else?

We tend to take the trees and shrubbery around our home for granted, but we can't do that with our lawns. They require our weekly attention in order to stay lush, green and healthy.

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If you have questions about your yard or garden, please call Travis County Master Gardeners at 512-854-9600. The person at the other end of the line may not have an immediate answer, but they'll research it for you and will get back with you.