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Lawn Care Schedule for Iowa

Some homeowners like to follow an intensive lawn care schedule and don't mind using whatever chemicals are necessary to keep a perfect lawn. Others are cool with letting nature take its course, don't want to use any chemicals at all, and are happy with a mixture of benign weeds, grass, and some thin spots.

But for a lawn that falls in the middle—it's not perfect but it's also not ragged—do the following:

March

- Mow the lawn once it starts to green up. In cool weather, be sure not to mow too low—set the mower for most Iowa lawns at 2 inches. Mow regularly as needed. As a rule, you should never cut off more than one-third of the leaf blade.

April

- If you choose to use chemicals, apply a combination lawn fertilizer/pre-emergent herbicide when the bright yellow forsythia is blooming.
- If you'd rather not use chemicals, check out corn gluten meal, developed by Iowa State University as an organic alternative to other pre-emergent herbicides.
- Patch bare spots. Fill low spots with excellent quality topsoil and seed. Overseed if desired, though fall is the best time. (Just be sure you apply the pre-emergent well after the grass seed is up so you don't kill your grass seed!)
- If you have compost, rake it over your lawn to feed it and to fill low spots. It's fabulous—improving soil texture and fertility.
- Edge along drives and sidewalks, if desired.
- Struggling with grass growing in a shady spot even after trying a grass seed mix specifically meant for shade? It's better to work with nature than against it. Grass is a full sun plant. Plant the low-light area with shade-loving groundcovers, hostas, and other plants.

May

- When daytime temperatures start to regularly hit 85 degrees, raise your mower height to 2 ½ to 3 inches. Longer blades of grass shade the soil, keeping it cooler so it uses less water and prevents weed seeds from germinating.
- Save your trees and shrubs from mower damage and other problems by mulching around them as far out as the branches reach, if practical.

June

- If you want an especially lush, green lawn, fertilize again early in the month, but this is fairly optional.
- Keep up with mowing. Regular mowing reduces weeds and is one of the best ways to keep a healthy lawn.

- Worried you may have grub damage? (They've been awful in recent years!) Click here for a good University of Illinois fact sheet, including what you can apply, if desired, to control grubs.

July

- This is the time most Iowans have to start watering their lawns. Water when we have received less than 1 inch of water a week. Water deeply and well—not just a quick, shallow watering. Put out a tin can or shallow dish to see how much water is being applied. It can easily take several hours to collect 1 inch.

August

- If there is an extended period of dry weather, you can let your lawn go dormant, that is, let it go brown, to conserve water. (Dormancy also helps control grub populations.)

However, do not then water a lawn heavily to bring it out of dormancy, then let it go dormant again, then water it again. This stresses a lawn. If you let it go dormant, let it be until natural rainfall restores it.

September

- If you choose to use chemicals, apply a lawn broadleaf herbicide late in the month. Also apply a fertilizer, either chemical or organic, to ensure a lawn that greens up faster in the spring.
- Fall is the best time to plant new lawn seed, once temperatures drop a bit. Patch bare spots. Fill low spots with excellent quality topsoil and seed. And if your lawn is thin, overseed it by sprinkling on additional lawn seed. Water in well and keep well watered for the next 2 weeks.
- If you have compost, rake it over your lawn to feed it and to fill low spots.

October

- As temperatures drop, again mow lower. Set the mower to 1 ½ to 2 inches for most grasses grown in Iowa.
- After the last mowing of the season, run the mower until the gas tank is empty for winter storage. Follow manufacturer directions on cleaning the filter/changing the oil. Take the blade in to be sharpened so it's ready for next year. A dull blade rips rather than cuts grass leaf blades, making them heal unevenly and giving lawns a beige cast, and promotes disease problems.

A thank you to Nick Christians, Iowa State University professor of horticulture specializing in turf management, for reviewing this article!