

## TIPS FOR A HEALTHY

# BEAUTIFUL LAWN

**L**awns can look beautiful without using pesticides and fertilizers that may contribute to water quality problems in a local creek, the Bay or Delta. The tips below will help you maintain a healthy and beautiful lawn that can out-compete weeds and other lawn pests.

### IRRIGATE AN ESTABLISHED LAWN PROPERLY

- Water enough to wet the soil 3" to 4" down. Grass roots will grow deeper and the lawn will be healthier.
- Test for water penetration by gently watering an area for 15 to 30 minutes. Push a shovel into the soil and tilt it forward. If the soil isn't wet 3" to 4" down, continue watering until it is. Track the watering time so you know about how long to water.
- Irrigate slowly so that water doesn't run off. Overwatering can wash

pesticides and fertilizers into the storm drains.

- If water runs off or pools even with slow irrigation, soil compaction may be a problem (see Lawn Aeration on the next page).
- Clay soils hold more moisture and dry out more slowly, thus they may need less frequent irrigation.
- Sandy soils dry out more quickly and may need more frequent irrigation.
- Before you irrigate, check the soil moisture. It should be almost dry before you add more water.

### FEED YOUR SOIL BY LEAVING GRASS CLIPPINGS ON THE LAWN

- Grass clippings can provide most of the nutrients needed by a lawn if the clippings are small enough to decompose quickly without forming mats on top of the living grass. Remove only  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the blade at any one time (see Mow the Right Way, next column).
- To decompose clippings, soil must be biologically active, i.e., contain bacteria, fungi, insects, worms, and oxygen. Soil under a lawn that has been

heavily fertilized or frequently treated with pesticides may be deficient in these elements.

### MOW THE RIGHT WAY

- Remove no more than  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the leaf blade at one cutting. Removing more can be very stressful for the plant and increase pest and disease problems.
- Mow when the grass is dry.
- During the summer months, cut the grass higher to help retain soil moisture.
- Keep mower blades sharp. Dull blades wound the grass and make it more vulnerable to pests and diseases.
- Alternate your mowing pattern frequently to avoid compacted ruts.
- If rust disease is present in your lawn, clean your mower between mowings to prevent spreading the disease.

### DEAL SENSIBLY WITH WEEDS

- Decide how many weeds you can tolerate. It is not realistic to expect a completely weed-free lawn.
- Dig up weeds by hand and sprinkle grass seed on any bare spots so weeds



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can't fill in. Water regularly with a fine spray until the grass sprouts.

- Keep grass growing vigorously to crowd out weeds. Don't mow grass too short; taller blades can shade the soil enough to prevent some weed seeds from germinating.
- Use corn gluten meal to prevent certain broadleaf weeds from germinating. Apply in spring or fall a few weeks before annual weeds begin to germinate.

## LAWN AERATION

- Aerate spots where you can't push a screwdriver five to six inches into the soil, where water pools, where grass looks thin, or where there is heavy traffic.
- Use a hollow-tined aerator that removes plugs of soil, either a foot-operated or motorized model.
- Irrigate deeply (soil should be moist 5" to 6" down) so you can push the aerator into the soil as far as possible. Allow soil to dry slightly before you begin.
- Leave the plugs on the lawn and break them up with a garden rake.

## DETHATCHING LAWNS

- Thatch is dead and dying, matted grass parts that accumulate on top of the soil. Thatch prevents air, water, and fertilizer from reaching the soil.
- Remove thatch with a rake if more than 1/2" thick.
- Aeration (see above) can help prevent thatch buildup.
- When soil is biologically active, grass clippings decompose and do not contribute to thatch buildup. This is a good reason to minimize or eliminate the use of broad-spectrum pesticides.

## FERTILIZING

- Unless the soil texture is sandy, nutrient deficiencies are unlikely and you may not need to fertilize at all. If in doubt, have your soil professionally tested.
- Grass clippings left on the lawn can provide most of the fertilizer.
- If you need to fertilize, use natural fertilizers or slow-release fertilizers, such as sulfur- or polymer-coated urea. These products release nutrients slowly over a longer period, allowing the grass to absorb nutrients more efficiently.
- Fertilizers, if misapplied, can kill soil life and ruin soil structure in even the best soils.

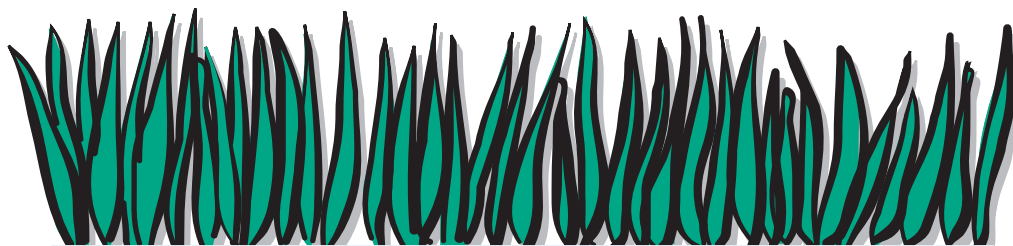
## LAWN SUBSTITUTES

Americans spend a great deal of time on their lawns, using an abundance of water, fertilizer, pesticides, and time. If a grass surface is not required, consider replacing all or some of your lawn with an attractive alternative. The following plants require little water and will accept occasional foot traffic:

- Woolly Yarrow (*Achillea tomentosa*) — Plant from flats or small pots, six inches apart; mow in March and July to a height of two inches.

- Caraway-Scented Thyme (*Thymus herba-barona*) — Plant all thymes from flats or small pots, six to eight inches apart. Mowing is not necessary. Rose-pink flowers cover the plant in early summer and attracts bees.
- Mother of Thyme (*Thymus praecox-arcticus*) — Two to six inches tall with purple and white flowers; mow to 1 1.5 inches in July and fertilize; attracts bees in summer.
- O'Connor's Legume (*Trifolium fragiferum*) — Plant from seed in fall; mow to two inches in April, June, August; attracts bees in summer.
- Garden chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*) combined with O'Connor's legume — Plant chamomile from flats or from small pots, six to eight inches apart. Plant O'Connor's legume as mentioned above and mow the two ground covers to two inches in April, June, and August. In areas with serious drainage problems, chamomile may not grow. In those spots, combine O'Connor's legume with any of the thymes listed above.

*Lawn Substitutes section adapted from Coate, B. 1990. Water-conserving plants & landscapes for the Bay Area, 2nd ed. East Bay Municipal Utility District.*



## SOME PREFERRED GRASSES FOR THE BAY AREA

### “Cool Season” Grasses (growing season is during cool weather)

Tall fescue (*Festuca arundinacea*)

Dwarf tall fescue (dwarf varieties of *Festuca arundinacea*)

Red fescue (*Festuca rubra*)

Perennial ryegrass (*Lolium perenne*)



## PLANTING A NEW LAWN

### START OUT RIGHT

- Have your soil professionally tested so you know the texture, pH, and salt and nutrient levels.
- Choose a mixture of the right varieties of grass suited to your climate and the conditions in your yard (see Preferred Grasses for the Bay Area).
- Choose pest- and disease-resistant varieties (ask your nursery).
- Choose sod that has been propagated in soil similar to your own.

### PREPARE THE SOIL BEFORE

#### INSTALLING A NEW LAWN

- Don't work the soil when it is very wet. You can damage its structure.
- Thoroughly mix soil layers of different textures before planting. Poor soil preparation can cause poor drainage resulting in weak turf.
- Break up all clods into fine particles and remove pebbles and stones.
- Check for low spots by irrigating. Smooth out areas where you see puddles (very important if you are seeding a lawn).

### IRRIGATE A NEW LAWN

- Be sure to keep the soil under a new lawn thoroughly moist until the lawn becomes established, but don't drown the plants. Too much water can also wash away seeds.

## WHITE GRUBS



Bay Area lawns sometimes suffer from white grubs, the larval (immature) stage of several species of beetle. The genus of beetles most common in the Bay Area is *Cyclocephala*, the masked chafer. Masked chafer adults do not eat, but in their grub stage can cause patches of lawn to die when they feed on grass roots.

Birds, moles, raccoons, and skunks can add to the damage when they dig in the turf looking for tasty grubs. But just finding wilted patches of grass or animals digging in the lawn does not mean that you have white grubs! You need to find grubs by verifying their presence in several places.

### DETECTION

The C-shaped grubs can be up to an inch long and are white with a brown head and three pairs of conspicuous legs.

Damage from grubs can begin to show as early as June or July or as late as August or September and can be mistaken for wilted grass under drought stress. Later, irregular patches die and can be lifted up or rolled back like a carpet. Grub feeding can make the ground feel spongy.

If you have had white grub problems before or suspect you have them this year, begin looking in mid-May by using a cylindrical bulb planting tool to extract a core of lawn so you can examine the roots. Pay particular attention to spots that look unusual.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Pay special attention to drainage and compaction. Healthy lawns can recover more easily from white grub damage.
- Walk over your grass wearing spiked sandals (Spikes of Death®) to kill grubs that are feeding near the soil surface.
- Products with imidacloprid may be used to control grubs. This material has a low acute toxicity to mammals. However, if the insecticide becomes as popular as diazinon, its use also may lead to water quality impacts. The best approach for grub control is to maintain a healthy lawn without using insecticides.
- Don't treat late in the season when you find dead patches of turf. By this time grubs have done all their damage for the season and are ready to stop eating. Treating now is fruitless. Remove the dead grass, cultivate, and reseed the area.
- Avoid using insecticides containing diazinon or chlorpyrifos. They are often ineffective because they bind with organic matter in the thatch and do not easily move down into the soil where the grubs are living.
- Plant warm-season grasses, such as bermuda grass or buffalo grass, or cool-season grasses, such as tall or dwarf fescues. These grasses are more tolerant of white grubs.



## PRODUCTS AND RESOURCES

### Soils Laboratory (see also the Yellow Pages)

A&L Western Agricultural Labs  
1311 Woodland Ave., #1  
Modesto, CA 95351  
209-529-4080

### Corn Gluten Meal (pre-emergent herbicide)

Supressa®  
Concern® Weed Prevention Plus

### Spiked Sandals (for grubs and lawn aeration)

Spikes of Death®

### Slow Release Fertilizer

Vigoro® Lawn Fertilizer

### Recommended Reading

- *Down to Earth Natural Lawn Care*, by Dick Raymond, published 1993 by Storey Communications, Inc., Pownal, VT.
- *U.C. PM Pest Management Guidelines: Turfgrass*, ANR Publication #3365-T, edited by M.L. Flint, published 1996 by University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Berkeley, CA; (510) 642-2431.
- *The Chemical-Free Lawn*, by Warren Schultz, published 1993 by Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA; (610) 967-5171.

## PESTICIDES AND WATER POLLUTION

Common household pesticides show up in treated wastewater and in Bay Area creeks, sometimes at levels that can harm sensitive aquatic life. So, water pollution prevention agencies have teamed up with participating Bay Area stores to reduce the risks associated with pesticide use. This fact sheet is part of a series of information pieces and store displays aimed at educating Bay Area residents about less-toxic pest management. Look for the "Our Water Our World" logo next to products in participating hardware stores and nurseries throughout the Bay Area.

Pest control strategies and methods described in this publication are consistent with integrated pest management (IPM) concepts, and are based on scientific studies and tests in actual home and garden settings. Use suggested products according to label directions and dispose of unwanted or leftover pesticides at a household hazardous waste collection facility or event. No endorsement of specific brand name products is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products that are not mentioned.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information, contact:

**Bio-Integral Resource Center (BIRC)**  
(510) 524-2567

**University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners** in your area  
(in the phone book )

**Central Contra Costa Sanitary District**  
website: [www.centernalsan.org](http://www.centernalsan.org)

**University of California IPM website:**  
[www.ipm.ucdavis.edu](http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu)

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**Thank You:**

UCCE Master Gardeners  
Participating stores

