

Lawn renovation

A Master Gardener How-To-Paper



John Griggs
Monongalia County, WV Master Gardener

Renovation of an existing lawn—abused by foot or vehicle traffic, or in decline for other reasons—is often a viable, less expensive and quicker alternative to starting over.

The renovation process is aimed at correcting soil compaction and thatch buildup, followed by over-seeding and proper care.

The 10 steps below can give rewarding results in just one short season; and the few pieces of special equipment used can be rented as needed.

1. ASSESS lawn condition

- Start by taking soil samples to determine amendment and feeding requirements. Contact the county Extension Service to obtain sample mailers. Follow the directions included. The West Virginia University labs will notify you (through your Extension agent) of the results in just a few weeks.
- Estimate the "weed" content of the lawn.
- If the lawn has less than 50% weeds, the lawn is a good candidate for this renovation process
- If the weed content is higher, lawn replacement is a choice, OR, repeat this process two or more times over consecutive years.
- Is dethatching required? Sample several growing areas by removing a plug using a small shovel or a bulb planter. Thatch is the dead organic layer just on top of the soil, intermingled with grass roots and stems. Is the thatch soft?, spongy?, 1/2" or more thick?; then dethatching is needed.

2. PLAN

- Sketch the lawn property to be worked with. Include items such as home, large trees, etc. Note sunny and shade areas, and damaged areas needing special attention
- Choose to plant both sunny and shade grasses if needed
- Schedule your effort; reserve dethatching and aerating equipment if needed

3. WEED control

- Treating the broadleaf weeds with herbicide is the first ACTION step. Follow the directions on the product; apply on a warm day with low winds and no rain in the forecast. Allow the herbicide to do its work before proceeding to the next steps.

4. SCALP the lawn

- Cut the grass to within 3/4" to 1" of the soil surface
- Use a grass catcher or rake the cuttings and any loose thatch
- Remove the clippings and compost After this process is complete, cut at normal height so the root system, stem system and blades branching are at correct height.



5. DETHATCH

Thatch is a layer of dead rhizomes, roots, and stems growing between the green layer and the soil, not grass clippings.

Thatch buildup is a result of improper fertilizing and watering. Thatch harbors mold and other diseases, and prevents water from reaching the soil and roots.

- The dethatcher of choice will have blades rotating in the vertical plane; adjust to dig into the soil 1/2"
- Run the dethatcher at right angles (e.g. north to south, then east to west)
- Rake to remove the loosened thatch. Dragging a section of chain link fence across the lawn will further loosen old thatch
- Remove all loosened thatch and compost

6. AERATE the soil

Aerating is performed to reduce the soil mass/compaction of the soil. This allows the soil to breathe, catch and absorb water more readily, and gives roots room to grow. Using aerifying equipment removes a core or plug of soil.

- Run the aerator over the lawn in two passes, north to south, and then east to west.
- Leave the core plugs to be dissolved by rain.

7. LIMING the lawn

Liming the lawn in conjunction with the aeration gives added advantage; some of the lime will fall into the holes left by the aerator, speeding its effects on the soil pH.

- Follow the application instruction given in the soil test results, using your spreader of choice
- Making two application at right angles to each other using 1/2 the total recommended amount of lime each time gives the best and most even application.

8. OVERSEEDING

Overseeding is planting new seeds amid existing lawn grasses, filling bare spots to improve the density of the lawn turf overall. Work done before this step has prepared a good seedbed

- Overseed at 1/2 the recommended rate for new lawn planting (bare spots at new lawn recommendation)
- Seed shade grasses, then sunny grasses, allowing overlap in the lawn
- Water, to "wash" the seeds into contact with the soil

9. FEEDING AND WATERING

The new baby seedlings will need TLC.

- Keep the seedbed moist until seeds germinate and are established
- Watering frequency can then be reduced, but water deeply enough to keep roots moist
- Begin a normal watering program after the new grasses are established (about 7-8 weeks) - water at infrequent intervals, about 1 " moisture per week, including rain
- Feed the lawn as advised in the soil sample test results

10. MOWING HINTS for the newly renovated lawn

- Allow the new grasses to root firmly for four weeks before mowing.
- Sharpen and balance the mower blade
- Adjust mower cutting height to the recommendation for your grasses and time of year
- Cut often enough to prevent matting or clumping of clippings. Never take off more than 1/3 of the grass height
- Vary the cutting pattern to prevent wheel tracks in the soil.