

## Get Your Lawns in Shape This Fall

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Most of the lawns in our area are comprised of cool season grasses like tall fescue or Kentucky bluegrass. These are called cool season grasses because they grow best in the cooler weather of fall and spring. (There are some other reasons such as when they produce seedheads and the type of photosynthesis they have, but we won't get into that here!) The key thing to remember is that what you do to your lawn this fall can have a huge impact on how it looks next spring. So let's outline what we need to do and when we need to do it!

Two practices we sometimes do to our lawns are de-thatching or core aerating. Core aerating is probably more important than de-thatching in most yards but regardless, if you are going to do either of these, do it early in September. If you are seeding a new lawn or overseeding an old lawn to thicken it up, you want to do these in early September too. Keep in mind that it has been hot and dry. If you decide to do some seeding or overseeding you will likely need to get into a watering regimen to get these seeds germinated and established. Once you start watering you need to stay with it so those new seedlings don't dry out and so that they can get well enough established so as to survive the winter weather.

What most homeowners are going to focus on in the fall, though, is fertilizing and weed control. In the fall of the year fertilization encourages the plant to build up its root system and develop more tillers in its crown. These tillers will produce more leaves next spring making the lawn thicker and lusher. This is in comparison to spring fertilization that simply encourages more leaf growth causing us to mow more often!

Unless you know that you have a phosphorus deficiency from a soil test you need to be using primarily nitrogen containing fertilizers in the fall. These are usually 25 to 35% nitrogen. Ideally we would fertilize twice. Once in early September and then a second time in late October. Both of these fertilizations should be primarily with nitrogen. I will note here that if you do happen to have a warm season grass lawn, this would include Bermudagrass, Zoysia or Buffalograss, you DO NOT want to fertilize in the fall. These grasses are now stating go dormant and fertilization will only encourage weeds.

Most of the weeds that homeowners object to first thing in the spring, this includes dandelions, henbit, chickweed and others, germinate and start growing in the fall, mainly once it starts to cool down in late September and early October. Weed control products for these weeds are only effective when applied to the growing weeds. Therefore, applying a weed control product or weed and feed product in early September will not achieve the desired goal as most of the weeds haven't germinated yet. If you wait until the latter half of October then these weeds have germinated and will be easily controlled. If you don't wish to use a weed and feed granular product you can also use a liquid herbicide application. Whichever you use, be sure to read and follow all label directions. If you are also reseeding this fall wait until the grass is big enough that you've been able to mow it a couple of times before applying herbicides.

Mowing height is a key element in keeping a lawn healthy and good looking. Mowing too short will encourage weeds to invade and make the lawn clumpy. Bluegrass should be mowed 2½ to 3½ inches tall and tall fescue 3 to 3½ inches tall. This includes year round with the exception of the first spring mowing.