**Weekly Express-News Article**

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**Weeds, Fertilizer and Aeration**

With the rains and mild temperatures in January and February lots of plants believe it is spring. Roses and fruit trees are blooming and your lawn has probably started to green-up. Bermuda grass the lawn most content to enjoy winter hibernation is greening-up all over the area.

The early green-up means that you can expect the winter weeds to push hard to produce seed before they decline in the heat. It also means that the summer weeds will begin germinating early this year.

It is always desirable to limit weed seed production as much as possible. One of the best ways is to mow the plants before the seed heads are produced. This is especially effective with the rescue grass and annual bluegrass that is likely growing in your lawn right now. Mow the weeds as frequently as necessary to prevent the seed heads from maturing. For thistles, henbet, and other weeds that are more likely to grow in the corners and edges of our shrub border or gardens, a string mower works well. You are not trying to remove the entire weed, only keeping it from producing seed.

Ideally it would be best to remove all weeds completely to prevent them from competing with the lawn and other more desirable plants but that is not always practical. The next best thing is to prevent seed production.

If you have bedstraw the string mower does not work very well. The sticky, stringy weed tangles up on the mower. A steel rake works pretty well for bedstraw. The plant sticks to the rake and is easy to pull off.

Notice that I am not recommending a contact herbicide. Contact herbicides take time to kill weeds, especially weeds near the end of their season. Applying a herbicide now to winter weeds is a waste of chemical. The weeds are declining already. They have one last mission in mind, to produce seed for next season.

It is, however, time to apply a pre-emergent herbicide to prevent the summer weeds – particularly crabgrass and sand burs. The chemical, when applied at the right time and as per instructions, prevents most summer weeds from germinating. Amaze and XL are good for this purpose but you may also want to try Green Light Crabgrass Preventer **2** or High Yield Weed and Grass Stopper. They are less expensive than Amaze and also include Dimension which has some ability to kill young weeds that germinate before the pre-emergent has activated.

The early green-up does not necessarily mean that you should fertilize the lawn early. For the most efficient and environmentally appropriate use of fertilizer apply a slow release lawn fertilizer such as 19-5-9 after you have mowed “real” grass (not weeds) twice. Waiting to that point means that there is enough root system to collect the nutrients and enough transpiration to pull them into the grass plants.

Even a slow release lawn fertilizer such as 19-5-9 is 50 percent fast release nitrogen. If the grass is not capable of pulling it from the soil at a fast rate, it is lost to the air, runoff or deep into the soil. Those of you who fertilize with organic fertilizers can apply the fertilizer in late March. Organic fertilizers are entirely slow release. They are also low nitrogen, so note that you should use three times as much fertilizer if your source is 6 percent nitrogen as opposed to the 19 percent in a 19-5-9 manufactured slow release fertilizer. The first number in the formula is the percentage of the bag that is the nitrogen source.

If you really want to benefit the lawn, consider aerating and applying a top dressing of ½ inch of compost.

Have a contractor do the job or do it yourself at one half the price. Rent an aerator that cuts plugs of soil from the sod and deposits it on the lawn surface. Order the compost from one of several horticultural supply retailers (Fertile Garden Supply, Keller Material, Garden Ville, and others.) One cubic yard covers 650 square feet of lawn. The material costs about $25 per cubic yard and can be delivered for about $30 for 4 to 6 cubic yards.

Aeration opens up the root system to air and allows water to penetrate. The compost filters into the channels to bring organic material into the root area. The result is a magic elixir for your lawn.

It is time to make sure your lawn care equipment is ready for action. Change out the gasoline and oil and sharpen the mower blade. Gasoline that has sat all winter’ breaks down and clogs up the carburetor.

It is also important to complete maintenance work on the irrigation system. A malfunctioning irrigation system can reduce the performance of your lawn plus cost you big bucks in water waste. Make an appointment for your irrigation contractor to check the uniformity of application, change out the rain sensor, and to find and repair all leaks. San Antonio Water System customers can call 704-SAVE (7283) to schedule a water saver review. The technician will even discuss with you how to use the controller most efficiently.

Another important maintenance activity is to apply boiled linseed oil to the wood handles for your rakes and shovels. Without this treatment each year it does not take long for the handles to crack and eventually disintegrate.