

Lawn Care for the Fall

Distribute 09-10-2020

In addition to the winter vegetable garden and spreading wildflower seeds it is time to give the lawn some attention.

The end of September and early October is the recommended time to fertilize the lawn. At this time of the year the fertilization has less to do with stimulating new growth than it does with providing the appropriate nutrients for the lawn grass to develop cold tolerance to survive the winter and the nutrients to make a fast start in the spring when the grass will be back in a growth mode.

What happens in the fall is that the lawn grass responds to the change in day length and reorganizes its internal chemistry, so it is much less likely to use nitrogen and other nutrients for growth. That is why the recommended formulation is called a "winterizer" and the nitrogen is in a fast release form. The nutrients are not used to produce more grass growth and you do not have to do any extra mowing even if you are generous with the "winterizer" fertilizer. The nutrients are reorganized and stored for the needed cold protection and the fast growth start in the spring.

It is also time to apply a preemergent herbicide if you want to reduce winter weeds in the lawn, perennial bed, and shrub border. Select the herbicide that best meets your needs for control. If bedstraw, thistle, dandelions, and other broadleaf weeds are the main culprits select a product such as Gallery that is designed to control broadleaf weeds. For grassy weeds such as rescue grass and annual bluegrass use a product such as Amaze or Dimension. They are designed to control grassy weeds. Amaze and Dimension, however, also do a good job controlling broadleaves such as henbit and chickweed. It is worth the time to confer with the staff at your herbicide supplier and it is also essential to study the labels to make sure you get the product that meets your needs.

If you have been following the discussion in this column and on our Gardening South Texas Radio Show you know there is at least one other option for some lawns this winter. If you have a lawn that is no longer prospering because there is too much shade and too little soil for efficient use of water and good growth it may be time to utilize the rescue grass and annual blue grass as the winter lawn.

Sustainable Winter Turf (SWT) is the concept that Dr. Jerry Parsons, my colleague on the Gardening South Texas Radio Show, and I developed when our St Augustine lawns became more shaded and we came to appreciate the winter weeds that infested (now we say "enhanced") the shade and drought affected lawns.

For several years we have mobilized our lawn care resources to support the St Augustine lawn and protect it from drought, shade, and weeds. Despite our best efforts, however, the lawns have declined. We discussed and embraced the concept of a new lawn strategy. Instead of directing all our resources and efforts to produce an acceptable summer St Augustine lawn, we have shifted to the more sustainable concept of a winter turf dominated by such desirable weeds as horseherb, rescue grass, and annual bluegrass.

Annual bluegrass, rescue grass and other winter weed grasses will naturalize in shady areas where the St Augustine grass is thin. Instead of trying to prevent them with a pre-emergent herbicide, or kill them

with a contact herbicide, mow them every 2 weeks. The Sustainable Winter Turf will look great until about April 1.

Another key plant in the WST is horseherb. Horseherb is the low growing reseeding perennial with small leaves and yellow flowers. It will fill bare ground in the shade or the sun. Horseherb is a broadleaf weed that is difficult to control with a contact herbicide. Forego your control efforts and take advantage of the tough plant's ability to form a thick cover in thin, hard packed soil where the winter grasses have trouble growing. Like annual bluegrass and rescue grass, horseherb responds very well to mowing.

In addition to reduced herbicide use, the Sustainable Winter Turf will allow you to reduce your lawn irrigation. A St Augustine lawn in deep shade is not going to form a thick turf whether it is heavily watered or not. The WST does not require irrigation. Save the water and take advantage of the Sustainable Winter Turf strategy!