

Planttalk's Fertilizing Lawns

It is easy to get spring fever as the end of winter approaches. Many people want to begin Gardening and lawn improvements in April. Even retailers encourage us to do so by stacking lawn fertilizer in front of grocery stores and Garden centers. Spring newspaper and radio ads feature lawn care products and fertilizers. This sign of spring is so widespread, many people assume April is the best time to fertilize lawns.

Most Colorado lawns are comprised of cool-season grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass or turf-type tall fescue. These cool-season grasses benefit the most from fall applications of fertilizer, usually sometime in October or November.

Applying a high-nitrogen fertilizer in April may cause grass to grow too fast, before roots can grow to support the lawn. This makes a lawn less tolerant of summer heat.

In most cases, an application of fertilizer in April is not needed when lawns were fertilized the previous fall or clippings are returned to the lawn. If an April application appears to be necessary, apply the fertilizer at a reduced rate. Normal applications can be applied early May and early June. This may be followed by an application in September or early October.

Cool-season grasses should not be given high-nitrogen fertilizers during the heat of summer. It causes excessive, lush growth that requires more frequent mowing and watering, and the lawn becomes more susceptible to insects and diseases.

Conversely, warm-season grasses, such as buffalo grass and blue grama, should be fertilized in late June or July, when most growth occurs.

Planttalk's Pre-emergent Weed Control

Pre-emergent herbicides or "weed preventers" are often used to control annual lawn weeds such as crabgrass, foxtails, barnyardgrass, spurge, knotweed, purslane and others. Examples include various "crabgrass preventers" on the market.

A pre-emergent herbicide does not prevent weed seed germination or kill the seed. Instead, the root system development of a young weed seedling is severely limited by the action of the pre-emergent herbicide, killing it before it "emerges." Pre-emergents will not control existing weeds, but will, if applied before germination, control seedlings of annual or perennial weeds.

After application, pre-emergents must be watered in or rained on to activate them. Some are more effective on grassy weeds; others on broadleaf (non-grass) weeds; others are equally effective on grassy or broadleaf weeds. Pre-emergents remain effective for a couple of weeks to 3 months or so, depending on the type or brand name used.

Follow label directions and do not exceed label rates of application. When applied in excess, some pre-emergents may damage the lawn grass or other desirable plants. As the name implies, a pre-emergent must be used prior to germination of the weed seeds so follow instructions for a timely application.

Planttalk Colorado is sponsored by CSU Cooperative Extension, Denver Botanic Gardens, and the Green Industries of Colorado. For additional information see www.ext.colostate.edu/ptlk