The Year-Round Lawn Care Guide (Free Download)

TL;DR

- A free, printable guide that covers grass types, mowing, watering, feeding, weeds, pests and diseases in one place.
- Advice is split for cool-season, warm-season and transition-zone lawns, so you can follow the plan that fits your region.
- Includes a season-by-season checklist for spring, summer, fall and winter, plus tools, safety and when to call a pro.
- No sign-up required: read it online or print it and keep it with your lawn gear.

This guide pulls the essentials of year-round lawn care into one place you can read online or print and keep in the garage. It is free, and you do not need to sign up for anything to use it.

Lawn care is not one-size-fits-all. A Kentucky bluegrass lawn in Minnesota and a St. Augustinegrass lawn in Florida need nearly opposite calendars, so this guide splits advice by grass type and region wherever it matters. And whenever fertilizers, weed killers or pest control products come up, the same rule applies: read and follow the label (the label is the law), and check your state and local rules first.

1. Know your lawn

Almost every lawn care decision depends on three things: what grass you have, what climate you live in, and what your soil is like.

Find your grass zone

- **Cool-season grasses** grow most in spring and fall and slow down in summer heat. They dominate the northern half of the country and higher elevations.
- **Warm-season grasses** grow most in summer heat, then go dormant and turn tan after frost. They dominate the South, the Gulf Coast and the desert Southwest.

Between the two sits the **transition zone**, a band across the middle of the country where summers are hard on many cool-season grasses and winters are hard on many warm-season ones. Tall fescue, zoysiagrass and bermudagrass are common there. Our guide to climate, grass zones and hardiness zones covers the map in more detail.

Your USDA Plant Hardiness Zone is based on average winter low temperatures. It helps predict winter survival but says nothing about summer heat or humidity, so your grass zone matters more.

Identify your grass

If you did not plant the lawn yourself, look at the blades, how the grass spreads, and when it greens up. For photos and more detail, see our guide to types of grass.

Grass	Type	What it looks like	Where it does well
Kentucky bluegrass	Cool	Soft, dark green, boat-shaped tip	North, sun to light shade
Tall fescue	Cool	Coarse blades, clumps, deep roots	North and transition zone
Perennial ryegrass	Cool	Glossy blades, sprouts fast	Northern mixes; winter overseeding in the South
Fine fescues	Cool	Narrow, needle-like blades	Northern shade
Bermudagrass	Warm	Fine blades, aggressive runners	Full sun, South and transition zone
Zoysiagrass	Warm	Dense, stiff, carpet-like	South and transition zone

Grass	Type	What it looks like	Where it does well
St. Augustinegrass	Warm	Wide, flat blades, thick runners	Florida, Gulf Coast, mild humid areas
Centipedegrass	Warm	Light green, slow growing	Southeast, acidic sandy soils
Buffalograss	Warm	Fine, gray-green, native	Great Plains, dry areas

Test your soil

A soil test is the cheapest way to stop guessing. Most state land-grant universities run soil testing labs through their cooperative extension service. Take small cores a few inches deep from 10 or more spots, skip the grass and thatch on top, mix them in a clean bucket, and send what the lab asks for. The report gives your pH and nutrient levels with recommendations.

Most lawn grasses do best with a pH roughly between 6 and 7; centipedegrass prefers more acidic soil. Lime raises pH and sulfur lowers it, but both work slowly, so apply them only when a test calls for them. Retest every few years.

Finally, measure your lawn's square footage. You need it to buy the right amount of seed and fertilizer and to set your spreader.

2. Mowing

Mowing well does more for lawn health than almost any product.

Mow high and follow the one-third rule

Never cut off more than about one-third of the blade at a time. If the grass gets away from you, bring it down gradually over two or three mowings. Taller grass shades the soil, grows deeper roots and crowds out weed seedlings. These are typical home-lawn heights; your local extension service may suggest slightly different numbers.

Grass	Typical mowing height
Tall fescue	About 3 to 4 inches
Kentucky bluegrass	About 2.5 to 3.5 inches
Perennial ryegrass	About 2 to 3 inches
Bermudagrass	About 1 to 2 inches
Zoysiagrass	About 1 to 2 inches
St. Augustinegrass	About 2.5 to 4 inches (dwarf varieties lower)
Centipedegrass	About 1 to 2 inches
Buffalograss	About 2 to 3 inches, or taller for a natural look

For cool-season lawns, set the mower at the top of the range during summer heat.

Good habits

- **Mow by growth, not the calendar.** In spring's growth surge that may mean every few days; in slow seasons, every week or two.
- **Keep the blade sharp.** A dull blade tears grass, leaving ragged brown tips that lose water and invite disease. Sharpen at least once a season.
- **Leave the clippings.** They break down quickly, return nutrients and do not cause thatch. Our article on grass clippings covers when bagging makes sense.
- **Mow dry grass** and **change direction** each time to avoid clumps and ruts.
- **Mulch light leaf cover** into the lawn in fall; rake heavy layers so they do not smother the grass.

For more on technique and equipment, see our full guide to lawn mowing.

3. Watering

The goal is deep, infrequent watering that trains roots to grow down, rather than daily sprinkles that keep roots shallow.

How much and how often

Many established lawns need roughly 1 inch of water per week during the growing season, counting rainfall. Hot, windy weather and sandy soil push that number up; cool weather and clay soil bring it down. Most lawns do well with one or two deep soakings a week rather than short daily cycles.

To see how long your sprinkler takes to put down an inch, set a few straight-sided cans around the lawn, run the sprinkler, and time it.

When and how

- **Water early in the morning.** Less is lost to evaporation, and the grass dries quickly. Evening watering leaves blades wet overnight, which favors disease.
- **Watch for thirst.** Footprints that stay pressed in, a bluish-gray tint and folded blades all mean it is time.
- **Match your soil.** Clay absorbs slowly, so use "cycle and soak": water part of the time, let it soak in, then finish. Sandy soil drains fast and may need water a little more often.

Letting a lawn go dormant

Many cool-season lawns can go dormant and turn tan in summer drought, then recover when cool, wet weather returns. If you choose dormancy, commit to it rather than switching back and forth, and keep traffic off. Some extension services suggest a light watering every few weeks during long dry spells to keep the crowns alive.

Many water utilities set watering schedules or seasonal restrictions, so check your local rules. If you have an in-ground system, a rain sensor or weather-based controller helps avoid watering in the rain. Learn more in our guides to watering your lawn and automatic sprinkler and irrigation systems.

4. Feeding

Fertilizer feeds grass, but the timing matters as much as the amount. Feeding at the wrong time can fuel weeds and disease instead of turf.

Read the bag

Every fertilizer bag lists three numbers, the N-P-K ratio: the percentages of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium by weight. Nitrogen drives color and growth and is what lawns need most. Phosphorus and potassium needs depend on your soil test. Our article on fertilizers and N-P-K basics goes deeper.

How much

Many extension services recommend no more than about 1 pound of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet in a single application, and less when using a quick-release product. To figure out how much product that means, divide 1 by the nitrogen percentage. For example, a bag with 20 percent nitrogen takes about 5 pounds of product to deliver 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. Always check that against the label rate, and calibrate your spreader.

Slow-release nitrogen feeds gradually and is less likely to burn grass or wash away; quick-release greens up fast but fades quickly. See how to choose a lawn fertilizer to compare products.

When

- **Cool-season lawns:** Fall is the most important feeding season, when grass is building roots and storing energy. A light feeding in late spring is optional. Avoid heavy nitrogen in summer heat, which can encourage disease.
- **Warm-season lawns:** Wait until the lawn has fully greened up in late spring, then feed during summer's active growth. Taper off in late summer so the grass is not pushing tender new growth as the first frost approaches. Centipedegrass needs much less nitrogen than most other grasses.
- **Transition zone:** Follow the schedule for your grass type, not your neighbor's.

Our lawn fertilizing schedule breaks this down by grass.

Follow the rules

Several states and many municipalities restrict phosphorus fertilizer on established lawns unless a soil test shows a need, and some set blackout dates (for example, during a rainy season or when the ground is frozen). Read and follow the label directions and local

regulations, never spread fertilizer on frozen ground, and sweep any granules off driveways and sidewalks back onto the lawn so they do not wash into storm drains.

5. Weeds

A thick lawn mowed at the right height is the best weed control there is. Weeds move in where grass is thin, soil is compacted, or the lawn is mowed too short.

Identify before you treat

- **Grassy weeds**, such as crabgrass, look like grass but grow in clumps with a different color or texture.
- **Broadleaf weeds**, such as dandelion, clover and plantain, have wider leaves with visible veins.
- **Sedges**, such as yellow nutsedge, look grassy but have triangular stems and need specific products.

Each can be annual (returns from seed) or perennial (returns from roots). Our guides to understanding weeds and broadleaf weeds can help with identification.

Prevention: pre-emergent herbicides

Pre-emergent products stop weed seeds from establishing. For crabgrass, the usual cue is when soil temperature a couple of inches down stays around 55°F for several days, which comes earlier in the South than the North. Apply too late and the seeds have already sprouted. Most pre-emergents also stop grass seed, so do not use them where you plan to seed unless the label says the product is compatible with seeding.

Treating weeds you can already see

- **Hand pulling** works well for scattered weeds, especially after rain when the soil is soft. Get as much root as you can.
- **Spot treatment** with a selective broadleaf herbicide targets weeds without harming most lawn grasses. In cool-season lawns, early fall is often the most effective time to treat perennial broadleaf weeds.

- **Check the grass list on the label.** Some warm-season grasses, including St. Augustinegrass and centipedegrass, are sensitive to certain herbicides. Many products also have temperature limits and waiting periods after seeding.

Whatever you use, read and follow the label directions and local regulations. Curious about home remedies? Our article on whether vinegar kills weeds explains what it can and cannot do. For a full prevention plan, see keeping the weeds out.

6. Pests and diseases

When a patch of lawn turns brown, resist the urge to grab a product. Many problems that look like insects or disease are really drought, dull mower blades, dog urine, buried debris or fertilizer burn. Our common lawn problems hub walks through diagnosis.

Common insect pests

- **White grubs** are C-shaped beetle larvae that eat roots. Damaged turf peels back like loose carpet, and animals digging in the lawn are often a sign. Peel back a square foot of turf in a few spots to count them; treatment thresholds vary by species and region, so check your state extension's guidance.
- **Chinch bugs** thrive in hot, sunny, dry spots and are a major pest of St. Augustinegrass in the South. See our guide to chinch bugs.
- **Sod webworms and armyworms** are caterpillars that chew grass blades, often in mid to late summer.

Preventive grub products are typically applied in late spring to early summer; curative products work best on young grubs in late summer. Read and follow the label directions and local regulations, and keep people and pets off treated areas as long as the label requires. If you have raised tunnels instead, see our article on moles, voles and gophers.

Common lawn diseases

- **Brown patch** appears as circular brown areas during hot, humid weather, especially on tall fescue. A related disease, large patch, hits warm-season grasses such as St. Augustinegrass and zoysiagrass in cool, wet spring and fall weather. See our guide to brown patch.

- **Dollar spot** shows up as small, straw-colored spots, often on underfed lawns.
- **Snow mold** appears as matted gray or pink patches after snowmelt in the North.
- **Mushrooms** usually signal decaying organic matter in the soil and are mostly cosmetic.

Cultural fixes come first: water in the morning, mow at the right height with a sharp blade, avoid heavy summer nitrogen on cool-season lawns, and improve airflow and drainage. Fungicides are mostly preventive; if you use one, follow the label directions and local regulations. Our lawn disease control guide covers the details.

7. Aeration, dethatching and overseeding

These jobs work best when your grass is growing strongly, so it can recover quickly.

Core aeration

Core aeration pulls small plugs of soil from the lawn so air, water and nutrients reach the roots. You likely need it if water puddles or runs off, a screwdriver is hard to push into moist soil, or the grass is thin despite good care.

- **Cool-season lawns:** early fall is ideal; spring is a second choice.
- **Warm-season lawns:** late spring to early summer, once the grass is actively growing.

Water the lawn a day or two ahead so the tines can penetrate. Mark sprinkler heads, shallow irrigation lines and buried pet fences before you start. Leave the cores on the lawn; they break down in a week or two. Our lawn aeration guide has a full walkthrough.

Thatch and dethatching

Thatch is the layer of stems and roots between the soil and the green blades. Up to about half an inch is normal; thicker thatch blocks water and fertilizer and harbors pests. Spreading grasses such as bermudagrass, zoysiagrass and Kentucky bluegrass build more of it. Dethatch only when the layer is thick, at the same times you would aerate. Learn more in our article on thatch and dethatching.

Overseeding

Overseeding fills thin areas and introduces improved grass varieties.

- **Cool-season lawns:** late summer to early fall is the best window. The soil is still warm, the air is cooling, and fewer weeds compete. Spring is a second choice.
- **Warm-season lawns:** many are grown from sod, sprigs or plugs rather than seed. Grasses that can be seeded, such as bermudagrass, centipedegrass and buffalograss, are seeded in late spring to early summer when soil is warm.
- **Winter color in the South:** some homeowners overseed dormant bermudagrass with perennial ryegrass for a green winter lawn. It looks good, but the ryegrass competes with the bermudagrass as it greens up in spring.

Aerate or rake first so seed touches soil, and keep the surface moist with light, frequent watering until the new grass is established. Then shift back to deep, infrequent watering. If you are starting over, read seed or sod? first.

8. Season-by-season checklist

Use soil temperature, green-up and frost as your cues rather than fixed dates. For a more detailed calendar, see maintaining your lawn through the seasons.

Cool-season lawns

Season	What to do
Spring	Rake up debris and matted spots. Service the mower and sharpen the blade. Apply crabgrass pre-emergent when soil stays around 55°F. Start mowing at the recommended height. Spot-treat broadleaf weeds. Feed lightly in late spring if needed. Patch small bare spots, or wait for fall.
Summer	Raise the mowing height. Water deeply, about an inch a week including rain, or let the lawn go dormant and keep traffic off. Skip heavy nitrogen. Watch for brown patch, grubs and drought stress. Check for grubs in late summer.

Season	What to do
Fall	This is the main season. Core aerate and overseed in late summer to early fall. Make your most important fertilizer applications. Treat perennial broadleaf weeds. Mulch or rake leaves. Keep mowing until the grass stops growing.
Winter	Stay off frozen or frosty grass. Use de-icers carefully near the lawn. Do not fertilize frozen ground. Drain or stabilize mower fuel and service equipment. Plan a soil test for spring.

Warm-season lawns

Season	What to do
Spring	Apply pre-emergent based on soil temperature (late winter to early spring in much of the South). Sharpen the mower blade and start mowing as growth begins. Wait for full green-up before fertilizing. Watch for large patch in cool, wet weather.
Summer	This is the main season. Fertilize on schedule. Mow often at the recommended height. Core aerate, dethatch and patch bare areas with seed, sod or plugs. Water deeply. Watch for chinch bugs, armyworms, sod webworms and grubs.
Fall	Taper off nitrogen as temperatures drop. Apply potassium only if your soil test calls for it. Consider a fall pre-emergent for winter weeds. Overseed with ryegrass only if you want winter color. Watch for large patch again.
Winter	Expect a tan, dormant lawn; that is normal. Water occasionally during long dry spells in arid regions. Keep traffic off frosted grass. Spot-treat winter weeds on mild days if the label allows. Service equipment.

If you live in the transition zone, follow the table for your grass type, and expect some overlap: cool-season grasses there may need more summer water, and warm-season grasses may green up later in spring.

9. Tools and safety

A good basic kit includes a mower sized to your lawn (see our comparison of lawn tractors, riding mowers and zero-turns), a string trimmer and edger (our lawn edging guide covers options), a broadcast spreader, a rain gauge, a garden rake, a soil probe or long screwdriver, and safety glasses, hearing protection, gloves and sturdy closed-toe shoes.

Mowing safety

- Pick up sticks, rocks and toys before you mow.
- Keep children and pets well away, and never give children rides on a riding mower.
- Never remove or disable guards or safety switches.
- Follow your mower manual on slopes. A common rule of thumb is across slopes with a push mower, up and down with a riding mower, and no steep slopes at all.
- Refuel only when the engine is off and cool. If the mower runs poorly, try our lawn mower troubleshooting guide.

Product safety

- Read and follow the label directions and local regulations every time, including protective equipment, rates and re-entry times.
- Do not apply before heavy rain or on windy days.
- Store products locked up in their original containers, and dispose of leftovers through your local household hazardous waste program.

Before any digging project, such as installing irrigation, call 811 a few business days ahead so underground utilities can be marked.

10. When to call a pro

Plenty of homeowners handle everything in this guide themselves. Hiring help makes sense for:

- **Big jobs and big lawns.** Large properties, steep slopes and renovations go faster with commercial equipment.

- **Equipment you do not own.** Core aerators and slit seeders can be rented, but they are heavy and awkward to haul.
- **Problems that keep coming back.** A trained eye may spot what you are missing. Your county extension office can also help with diagnosis.
- **Pesticide applications.** Many states require people who apply pesticides for hire to be licensed or certified, so ask.
- **Irrigation work,** which often involves permits and backflow rules that vary by area.
- **Time.** Sometimes the best reason is getting your weekends back.

Get written estimates that spell out what each visit includes, how often they come, and how contracts can be changed or canceled. Our articles on lawn maintenance contracts and what lawn service costs explain what to look for.

Whether you do it all yourself or share the work with a local lawn care pro, the plan is the same: know your grass, mow high, water deeply, feed at the right time, and work with the seasons instead of against them.

Frequently asked questions

Is the Year-Round Lawn Care Guide really free?

Yes. The full guide is on this page at no cost. You can read it online or use your browser's print option to print it or save it as a PDF.

Do I need to sign up or give my email address to get the guide?

No. There is no form, account or email required. Everything is on this page.

Does the guide cover my region?

It is written for lawns across the United States, with advice split for cool-season, warm-season and transition-zone grasses. Exact timing still varies with your local weather, so your state's cooperative extension service is the best source for dates in your area.

Related guides

Maintaining Your Lawn: A Seasonal Lawn Care Calendar

A seasonal lawn care calendar for cool-season and warm-season grass: when to mow, feed, seed, aerate, control weeds and grubs, water and winterize.

Basic Lawn Care for Beginners: A Simple First-Year Plan

New to lawn care? Learn how to identify your grass, mow, water, feed and handle weeds, plus a simple first-year plan and the tools you need.

Types of Grass: A Guide to Cool-Season and Warm-Season Lawn Grasses

Compare 10 common lawn grasses, from Kentucky bluegrass and tall fescue to Bermuda, zoysia and St. Augustine: shade, drought, wear, upkeep and choosing.

Lawn Fertilizing Schedule: When and How to Feed Cool- and Warm-Season Grass

A practical lawn fertilizing schedule by grass type, with annual nitrogen ranges, timing cues, spreader calibration, watering in, and blackout date rules.