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Lawn Care in North Texas

I. What Is My Lawn For?

- **Decide** - Every lawn area is different! Is this lawn area for high show, utility, or simply to keep the mud away? The lengths one is or should be prepared to go to maintain a lawn DO differ based on what the purpose of the area is for.
- **"Keeping The Mud Away"** - This category normally represents acreage or large lots where some of the yard away from the home is mowed simply to keep it in check, but is not a feature or used area. This normally isn't your suburban neighborhood; it represents home sites for which the lot size is so large that maintaining the whole area as a tight, watered lawn is not practical, either from a cost or time standpoint.
- **Utility** - Kids and pets need places to play, and adults like to sit out in the lawn area and cook out, or walk around, or work on projects. These areas need to look good, too, but they're going to experience some wear from chairs, toys, running around, tools, children's pools, stomping feet, etc. and need to take this into account. There's going to be more weed pressure in these areas!
- **High Show** - This is the lawn of your dreams. Not one weed, everything the perfect height, green as green can be. These areas are time intensive - we love them, but decide how much time you're willing to spend to get this result. It's very rewarding to have this look, but does require the investment of time (and cost).

II. What Is My Lawn Made Of?

Identifying the type of lawn you have is the first step toward maintaining it properly. Almost every lawn in North Texas will be made of one of two different turfgrasses, or a combination. The most common turfgrasses are:

- **Common Bermuda** - thin, trailing grass that's very heat tolerant, doesn't need excessive watering, looks good mowed short - common Bermuda is by far the most common type of turfgrass in North Texas. Needs at least five hours of sunshine to get established. Bermuda is the only really good-looking permanent turfgrass for the area which can be established from seed. Good for high use areas.
- **Raleigh St. Augustine** - a coarser, trailing grass that is also heat tolerant, but tends to need more water than Bermuda. St. Augustine is much more aggressive than most common turfgrasses and will crowd other weeds and grasses out easily. St. Augustine is more shade tolerant than Bermuda, and will establish in roughly four hours of direct sunshine. Mature St. Augustine lawns will continue to do well with even less light. Decent in high use areas.

Other Grasses Include:

- **"Tif" Bermuda** - shorter, tighter types of Bermuda - if mown with a specialty reel mower, many types are suitable for golf course greens. Highly intensive in maintenance need!
- **Zoysia** - coarser in texture, Zoysia is not a water intensive grass. It's slower growing than Bermuda or St. Augustine, and really is a pretty nice turf. Not common in the area because of higher cost. No homebuilder uses it; any Zoysia lawns in the area have been planted by the homeowner.
- **Buffalo grass** - a very low water use grass, this is probably Texas' only native turf grass. It's not suited for high traffic areas, but does well in areas of low use and low watering.

- **Fescue** - A seeded grass for shadier areas. Fescue needs overseeding each fall to thicken the turf after summer's heat stresses it, but fescue is useful to put a green grass instead of mud in deeper shade areas. Green during the winter.
- **Ryegrass, annual and perennial** - Ryegrasses are often overseeded atop Bermuda lawns during the early fall for green lawns during the wintertime. Annual is less expensive but is a much coarser grass requiring more mowing to keep in check. The perennial is a prettier grass. Both will die out in the heat of the late spring. Not a permanent turf for North Texas.

III. The Basics of Maintenance

There are a few things any turf needs to survive and thrive, anywhere around the world. Here are the main pointers for our area:

- **Sunshine:** This is the first thing any turf needs to do well. If you're getting less than five hours of direct sun, many turfgrasses will have difficulty taking hold and growing vigorously. Provide this! Limb up trees, move things, whatever it takes to get enough sun in your area. If an area's too dark, it's time to consider a bed of ground cover.
- **Mowing:** Building a fine turf begins with mowing, regularly, and at the correct height. Turf should be mown for most turfgrasses weekly for the best look. Every 4 to 5 days would be ideal for Bermuda! This may be a bit difficult to do, but shoot for at least a weekly mowing. Do not allow your turf to become too tall; you should avoid the need to cut more than a third of the green growing blades off at any time, as it places additional stress on the grass.

Mowing heights for common grasses (This is your tallest recommended cutting height):

- Bermuda - 1.5"
- St. Augustine - 2-2.5"
- "Tif" Bermuda - .5-.75"
- Zoysia - 1.5-2"
- Fescue, Ryegrasses - 2-3"
- Buffalo grass - 1.5-2"

You may mow up to .5" taller during droughts or if the area is subject to heavy traffic. It's important to not allow your turf to become too tall. Your grass will brown out for lack of sufficient sun at the base, and those areas will not green back up until the grass is short-mown and allowed to regrow, something normally done during the late winter only. Tall turf is a weak turf, and a turf that is far more prone to weeds once you do finally cut it back down to size.

Not only is it easier to simply leave lawn clippings where they fall, it's much better for your turf, as long as you're mowing often enough. Short clippings quickly compost down at the soil level and feed your lawn, and the nutrients from clippings can start to re-enter the turf in as little as ten days!

One mowing a year should be bagged, and it's the clean up mowing you should do in late February. Remove the dried, dead material and throw it away. This dry material is slow to break down, and it's a nuisance for a barefoot lawn. Mow one to two notches shorter than usual, and then immediately raise your mower to your normal maintenance height when you're done. Never scalp down into the soil! If your mower blade hits soil at any point, you're cutting the turf way too low. Don't mow below your normal thatch level.

Never mow when the turf is wet. Not only is your cut ragged and uneven, you will easily spread lawn diseases if they are present.

- **Watering** - A turf that survives and holds your grade doesn't take a lot of water, particularly if you don't care if it's dormant looking during midsummer. A lush, green lawn does. Which do you want? During severe drought, your lawn can survive with a single watering per week. It'll look tired, but will recover quickly after watering can resume.

We recommend at a bare minimum two solid waterings a week on any lawn-use turf during the summer, or a watering as often as every other day for a sharp-looking lawn. If you're feeding your lawn heavily for the best green look, you'll need to support it during the summer with the water it needs to perform. Watering more than every other day is not recommended, as it'll lead to shallowly rooted grass. and increase disease spread.

- **Fertilizing** - Here's the basics of lawn fertilization in our area. Most lawns, particularly Bermuda lawns, need to be strongly fed with a good slow-release nitrogen fertilizer, preferably with iron and sulfur. We recommend our own Covington's Premium lawn fertilizer for all common turfgrasses in North Texas. It'll give you a good solid push of greening that won't quickly wear out like many fertilizers will.

For organic maintenance lawns, your choice of lawn fertilizer will probably vary, but something with at least 4% available nitrogen is desirable for your lawn's upkeep. Our Nature's Guide 4-3-2 is a good poultry litter based fertilizer, well suited for your lawn. "Grasscycling", by leaving your clippings where they fall, helps as well. Just use a good mulching blade.

IV. Things We Recommend For Everybody

- **Sprinkler Audit** - Do this now if you haven't, and do it every spring on a regular basis. A sprinkler audit is simply you checking each zone of your sprinkler system to ensure it's throwing evenly, all heads are working properly, aren't blocked with trash or bugs, and that you've got it on for long enough at a station. We also call a sprinkler audit the "Tuna Can Test", because it's simple to put low bowls, cans, butter tins, what-have-you out in several locations through a zone just to see how much water each area is getting. Your eye can trick you on the amount of water you think you see going out, but a tuna can and a ruler won't steer you wrong. We recommend a half inch of rain per irrigation cycle; if you're getting a lot of run-off, split this watering into two cycles on the same morning - for example, if 15 minutes runs off but your sprinkler test says you need 15 minutes to make a half inch of rain, split it into two eight-minute waterings a couple of hours apart. Most sprinkler systems will easily support this.
- **Common Sense With Sprinklers** - If we've been having enough rain that you're pretty sure you saw an Ark floating down Main Street, **please** turn your sprinklers off until we dry out. It's a large waste of water to irrigate a soaking wet lawn, and it costs you money! Many newer sprinkler systems have automatic rain sensors that will shut off your sprinkler system if we receive enough rainfall. Consider installing this, or just use plain sense. Just don't forget to turn your system back on when the skies clear and we start to dry out once more.
- **Core Aeration** - Especially for Bermuda lawns, rent a core aerator and run it across your entire lawn, at least every few years or more often for high traffic areas. Golf courses will aerate greens several times per year. Your lawn will look torn up for a few days, but will quickly heal together and be better for the aeration by having a less-compacted soil to grow in. Your lawn will take water better, root more deeply, and have fewer diseases.
- **Hand Pulling Is Your Friend** - If you have no weeds, and you see one pop up in your lawn, pull it! An occasional bend-over and pull will save you major weeding later, from the seeds that one weed you missed scatters all over your yard.
- **Don't Overdo The Weedkiller** - No matter which lawn herbicide you're using, read the label carefully and follow it. Those instructions are there for a reason! Homeowners throughout the nation do almost as much damage to their lawn by misapplying weedkillers and fertilizers than the weeds themselves do. Don't fear the weedkiller, but do read the instructions, and don't get creative with mix rates. Twice as much herbicide probably would kill those weeds faster, but your lawn isn't looking too sharp where you sprayed that overstrength herbicide, either.
- **Weed And Feeds Are Terrible** - We don't care who makes it, what's in it, or what it's supposed to kill. Most post-emergent herbicides work better through leaf absorption, and are better applied as a

spray - weed and feed fertilizers either are watered in (to wash the fertilizer off the blades of grass, highly desirable) and don't kill everything you wish killed, or you leave the granules stuck on the blades (so the weedkiller works better), and stress your grass from fertilizer sticking to the foliage. Additionally, rotary spreaders - which most of us use - can easily scatter granules of this product into flowerbeds and over the root systems of trees, causing damage to desirable plants. The most effective weed and feed fertilizers put so much active ingredient into the bag that they more or less work on a lot of your weeds, or else the companies making the products would be out of business - but it's like using a hammer on your marble countertop to kill a gnat. It works, but you sure wish you hadn't done that to your counter. Leave any weed and feed fertilizer, made by anyone, on the shelf.

V. Advanced Maintenance - Conventional

- **Weed Control** - Weed control, to be effective, is done using both **pre-emergent** and **post-emergent** herbicides. Here's a breakdown of the most commonly used products and how to use them effectively. There are loads of different products made by dozens of different companies to perform these tasks. We'll list the ones by name that are the most effective. The point to keep in mind on herbicides is whether the weed to be controlled is a grassy weed (looks like a normal grass, makes a grass seed-head), a broadleafed weed (anything else, practically), or nutsedge (triangular stem, grows amazingly fast, prevalent in wet areas). There are hundreds of weeds that grow in our area, but these three categories are all you really need to know; once you know in which category your weed falls, you will know how to effectively control it.
 - **Pre-emergents** are used to prevent weeds from sprouting, or to quickly kill young emergent sprouts of weeds before they become a nuisance. We recommend **Dimension** pre-emergent to prevent any of your grassy weeds and many of your broadleafed weeds from sprouting. Apply this pre-emergent in February and September for the best control of these problems. If dandelions are the problem child in your lawn, back this up with an additional application of **Portrait** pre-emergent to give excellent broadleafed weed control. Stopping the weeds before they sprout is truly the most effective control. Both of these pre-emergents can be used in any common turf in North Texas.
 - **Post-emergents** are used to kill weeds which have already sprouted. Pre-emergents only control seed and very young sprouted seed, and provide no control of mature weeds. Even lawns which have had a good treatment of pre-emergent herbicide can have an occasional weed; pre-emergents will stop easily 90-95% of the weeds before they sprout, but no product can claim to provide 100% control. **2, 4-D** is the most used control for broadleafed weeds of all sorts; this product (which we have in our **ferti-lome Weed-Out**) is safe for any common turfgrass in our area. Avoid overspray of flowerbeds and root systems of trees with this product. **MSMA** is a grassy weed herbicide that can be used in Bermuda grass only to control grassy weeds, such as crabgrass and dallisgrass, but this product is being phased out and will no longer be available after this year. Spot sprays of our **Hi-Yield Kill-zall** can be used in either St. Augustine or Bermuda to kill individual clumps of grassy weeds. This spraying will kill anything you contact with the herbicide, but has no soil residue. The lawn will quickly regrow into the kill areas as long as those areas are not overlarge. Just be careful to spray only the weeds to be removed, and not the turf around it.
 - **Special Note For Nutsedge** - Nutsedge is one of our worst problem weeds, particularly in moist areas, and will aggressively spread in those areas. Use our **Sedgehammer** or **Prosedge** products to effectively control this king of pesky weeds. Nutsedge is the one weed we absolutely do not recommend pulling; due to the construction of its root system, you'll likely just spread the weed by doing so. Other herbicides may burn this weed back some, or even say they kill it - but they simply don't, regardless of the packaging. **Image** is another control, but it's terribly slow and not as effective as the two above products. Spray for nutsedge in the hot season, as it can not be controlled once daytime temperatures fall below 80 degrees at mid-day.

- **Insect Control** - Insecticide use in the yard is always a touchy subject, because while homeowners (usually) don't want to see a single bug ("I HATE bugs!!"), they also don't want to overuse insecticides for fear of harming themselves, their children, pets, and so forth. We really don't mind seeing some bugs in the yard, as they're part of a healthy yard's ecosystem, but some critters just have to be invited to leave. Identify which critters need control before you just try to kill everything; you'll save yourself time and insecticide exposure by not treating when no treatment is needed.

Some of the typical problem critters that need to go in the lawn include:

- **Grubs** - there's probably at least one grub in every square yard of soil in North Texas - they're Junebug larvae! A grub here and there through the yard can't do enough damage to ever become noticeable, so don't worry if you run across a few here and there. If you start to have turf damage (parts randomly drying out and dying, lifting off the ground with none or very few roots attaching it to the ground), or see a whole lot of them digging in the yard, then it's time to treat. Use our **Hi-Yield Grub Free Zone II** for outstanding season-long control, and summer's the time to do so.
- **Chinch Bugs** - more of a problem in St. Augustine lawns, this pest is normally found in the hottest, driest parts of the yard. If parts of your St. Augustine lawn look like they're drying out, but are still firmly attached to the ground and you absolutely know that area's been well watered, look for these pests. They're about 3/16 of an inch long, oblong, black with grey diamond pattern on the back, and are most easily found with a "can test". Cut both ends out of a coffee can, and firmly embed it into the ground along the edge of a damaged area. Fill the area with water, and wait. Chinch bugs if present will float in roughly five minutes. **Malathion** or our **Kill-A-Bug II** granule will give effective control of this problem. Chinch bugs, unlike fungal disease issues, will have a VERY irregular pattern of damage, not even remotely even or circular.
- **Fire Ants** - Normal ants aren't a problem, but fire ants are the bane of a homeowner's enjoyment of their back yard. If fire ants move into areas you wish them gone in, spread our **ferti-lome Come and Get It** bait across any affected area, and a couple tablespoons of this around any large mounds. It's a low toxicity solution that really works.
- **Mosquitoes** - These critters have no redeeming properties. I think we can all agree we hate mosquitoes! A weekly spray of infested areas with **Malathion** will kill them out.
- **Disease Control** - there's only a couple of major lawn diseases most of us need to deal with in this area. They are:
 - **Brown Patch** - more serious on St. Augustine than Bermuda lawns, the grass blade will easily pull away from the runner (as it will be rotten at that spot), and a spot roughly 3-10 feet in diameter will be yellowing and browning, although the very center of the spot will likely remain green. Brown patch will weaken lawns badly but rarely kill them outright, and is less prevalent in the heat of our summer than it is in the mid-spring. Treat with **ferti-lome Systemic Fungicide or F-Stop**.
 - **Take-All Patch** - can hit both major turfs in our area but is still worse on St. Augustine, random patches up to 20 feet in diameter at a time and will kill the whole turf outright, leaving nothing in the middle. With no chinch bugs present, no grubs, the leaves will yellow and the roots will darken, and the lawn in that area will simply thin in the heat of the summer. The infection takes place in the cooler, moister spring and damages the lawn throughout the summer. The fungus responsible is only active in alkaline environments, so use acid-forming fertilizers, elemental sulfur, and Canadian peat moss as a top dress to prevent it from becoming active, and drench the area with **ferti-lome Systemic Fungicide**.

VI. Advanced Maintenance - Organic Program

- **Weed Control** - the best organic control of weeds is simply to never let them get started. Pre-emergent use is absolutely essential; spot sprays afterward only if needed. Other than nutsedge, there's no real need to distinguish which type of weed you're facing, as your controls do not differentiate between types of weed.

- **Pre-emergents** - use **Nature's Guide corn gluten meal** at the rate of 40# per 2,000 sq. ft. to not only give the lawn a nice nitrogen feeding, but also to prevent most seed from sprouting in the area. The protein content of the corn gluten will kill sprouting seeds. Proper mowing should also be listed as an organic pre-emergent; a properly maintained lawn rarely allows anywhere for weed seed to sprout.
- **Post-emergents** - use **Nature's Guide 20% Vinegar** with 2 oz. per gallon of orange oil as an effective non-selective spot spray for weeds. It will kill whatever you spray it upon, so use some caution, but has no soil residues you'd want to avoid.
- **Nutsedge** - there are those who say strong drenches of molasses to areas afflicted with nutsedge will control this pesky weed. We've tried it, and that was some healthy looking nutsedge. Let areas infested with nutsedge dry out completely, and during the summer, spread black plastic above sunny areas hopelessly infested to kill absolutely everything beneath the plastic. Reseed or resod the area. Spot spray isolated spots of nutsedge with the same vinegar mix you use on other weeds, and respray as needed. Let nutsedge infested areas dry out between watering as best you can. Nutsedge doesn't compete well when it's very dry.
- **Insect Control** - the best control of damaging insect pests is a healthy, well maintained lawn! Healthy plants rarely have serious insect problems. Just as a well-fed, rested person doesn't get sick as often or as severely as a person working on four hours of sleep and junk food, a healthy lawn resists many of these problems before they even get started. Some of the top pests to deal with are:
 - **Grubs** - there is an effective control long term for grubs in the organic program - if only we had sandy soil! Milky spore won't penetrate our soil effectively to control the pests. Grubs rarely cause enough damage to notice in an organic lawn, as the organic gardener works primarily to produce strong, healthy roots on their plants above all else, and a healthy organic lawn has "more where that came from, grub!".
 - **Ants** - Ants are not the bad guys in general. Fire ants, where you want to walk and move about, are a problem. Our **ferti-lome Come and Get It** product is very effective at baiting fire ants, and it's an organic solution. If you have normal "sugar" ants or otherwise harmless ants around, leave them be, because:
 - **Chinch Bugs** - proper lawn maintenance reduces all the conditions that lead to heavy chinch bug infestations, but ants are also a natural foe of the chinch bugs in your lawn! There! You now have a reason to not kill every ant you see! Neem oil and pyrethrin sprays are also helpful - use our **ferti-lome Triple Action** spray if they get out of hand.
 - **Mosquitoes** - Mosquitoes can be easily controlled in the larval stage in standing water areas with mosquito dunks - a safe biological control. Spray our **Nature's Guide Mosquito Repellent**, a citronella based product, in lawn and leisure areas to repel mosquitoes for up to a week at a time, depending upon rainfall.
- **Disease Control** - again, the organic lawn's first line of defense is the emphasis on healthy growth; smaller-celled growth from organic fertilization is tougher and more resistant to fungal disease penetration. But if you've a problem, either with brown patch or take-all patch, the following products will help:
 - **Actinovate** - a safe biological fungicide, this is an actinomyces bacteria (a normal soil bacterium) with a real hunger for most fungal patch diseases. A solid drench of this product, backed up with a soil penetrant like our **Enviro-Raindrops**, can start a colony of beneficial bacteria that eat many pesky fungal diseases for dinner.
 - **Canadian Peat Moss** - Canadian peat moss is very acidic, and the peat moss absorbs excess water. Keeping the blades of turf drier and more acidic reduces most of the fungal disease growth of the types we have around here.
 - **Potassium Bicarbonate** - sprays of potassium bicarbonate are effective at controlling the mild cases of brown patch you're likely to find in an organically maintained lawn.