AgriLIFE EXTENSION
Texas A&M System

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Everyone's dream is to have that perfect landscape. All the television shows talk about curb appeal and that first impression of a home setting the stage for any type of visit. Wouldn't it be great if we could wave some magic wand and all these dreams come true? Of course, we know this isn't the case; it takes diligent work to maintain a groomed landscape. As a child, my granddad always told me, "Do it right the first time and you won't have to do it again." I'm not sure this works with the landscapes. It seems we keep doing the same thing year in and year out. It's important to have a plan with the final product in mind.

New Yard Turf Grass

In general, native grass lawns don't require much care and maintenance. That is one of the things that make them great. If you plant the right species, you don't have to fall into the endless cycle of fertilizing, watering, and mowing. The best turf grass for this area is Buffalograss (Buchloe dactyloides). It is native to West Texas; therefore it is perfectly adapted and requires little to no care once it is established. Fertilizer is generally unnecessary with this species. Should you decide you want to give this grass a boost, a thin layer (a half inch) of compost spread lightly across the yard in the spring should do the trick.

Once established (six to eight weeks), Buffalograss lawns require little to no supplemental watering. This grass is adapted to the natural rainfall patterns found here in West Texas. Buffalograss roots penetrate several feet into the soil, enabling it to thrive in our harsh conditions. It will remain green on as little as 1.5 inches of rain a month. Should you decide to add supplemental water, water deeply and infrequently, two or three soakings a summer should be plenty for this turf.

The frequency with which you mow this grass is dependent upon the variety you choose and your desired aesthetic effect. First, there are several varieties of Buffalograss on the market. The "609" variety is the most popular for lawns. It may need to be mowed a couple of times a summer to keep it looking "trimmed". The "Stampede" variety never needs to be mowed. It grows to 4 inches and stops. Currently, "Stampede" is not as widely available as "609", but hopefully it will become more so in the near future. The variety "Turfallo" was bred for the conditions of the West Texas area and stays greener on less water. It can be mowed a couple of times during the summer to keep it looking trimmed as well.

You will find others in the West Texas area recommending turf grasses such as Bermudagrass and/or Fescue. Bermudagrass is very aggressive and will invade planting beds. Buffalograss is not nearly as invasive, so you will not be constantly fighting it to keep it out of your planting beds. Some will argue that you may as well plant Bermudagrass since Buffalograss will be overrun by Bermudagrass from neighboring lawns. This should not happen if you are properly watering your Buffalograss lawn. If watered as recommended, an established Buffalograss lawn can stand its ground against Bermudagrass.

Lawn Care 101

People love their lawns, and millions of dollars each year are spent to keep them beautiful. The management of grass varieties will differ depending on the type of grass one has in their lawn.

Whether your turf is St. Augustine, Bermuda or Zoysia, there are a few tips to help all homeowners have a healthier lawn. Cultural practices are the key to managing your lawn.

Mowing height is important. Never remove more than 1/3 of the grass blade at one time. St. Augustine grass should be mowed between 2-4 inches in height; Bermuda should be mowed at 1-2 inches, for both common Bermuda and hybrid Bermuda, and Zoysia should be mowed at ½ to 1½ inch. Mow shaded lawns ½ to 1" higher than lawns in full sun. Do not remove clippings after mowing. Clippings decompose and add nitrogen to your lawn, reducing the amount of nitrogen fertilizer needed. Always be sure that your mower blades are sharp to reduce disease problems. Mowing often will help reduce weed growth by eliminating the seed heads before they form.

With the cool, wet weather, fungi has become a major problem. Brown patch (Rhizoctonia) causes circular patches of light brown, thinned grass from a few inches to several feet in diameter. A musky odor may be present for 12-24 hours before symptoms appear, and may persist after symptoms show. Individual leaf blades and sheaths can be easily pulled from stolons because of rotting of the leaf sheath. Stolons often remain green. Grass will show a slight greening in the middle of the circular patches. Brown patch favors temperatures from 75-85o F., which occur in late spring and early fall. The disease stops when air temperature reaches 90o F. Homeowners can help prevent this disease by using minimum amounts of nitrogen when fertilizing. Water so that moisture is present on the grass for the shortest possible time. Increase aeration in poorly drained soils. If chemicals are needed, use (PCNB) known as Terraclor or (Myclobutinil), known as Immunox or F-Stop (a new product by Fertilome).

Herbicides for weeds, pesticides for insects, and fungicides for diseases can be selective to particular weeds, insects or diseases. Before using any chemical, be sure to identify the weed, disease or insect so that you will know the correct product to use. Whenever possible, use organic products or biological controls first. Know the square footage of your lawn. All products are applied according to area of the lawn, and knowing the square footage prevents over application. Always use caution when using herbicides. Herbicides for turf can cause damage to ornamental plants. Always read and follow label directions.

Not only can over-fertilization contribute to disease problems, but will increase the need for additional water due to rapid growth. As a general rule, St. Augustine and Bermuda should have 3 to 4 pounds of nitrogen per year. Never apply more than 1.5 pounds of nitrogen in a single application. For Bermuda, the recommended application is 1 pound of nitrogen every 6 weeks, and 1 pound every 8 weeks for St. Augustine. To determine the amount of fertilizer to apply to equal 1 pound of nitrogen per 1000 square feet, divide 100 by the first number of the fertilizer analysis. If you are applying 1.5 pounds of nitrogen per 1000 square feet, substitute 150 for 100. For example, if using a 15-5-10 fertilizer, at 1 pound per 1000 square feet, divide 100 by 15, which equals 6.6 (100¸15=6.6). If you have 5000 square feet, you take 5000 divided by 1000, and multiply by 6.6. This will give you 33 pounds of fertilizer needed for one application for 5000 square feet- (5000¸1000) X 6.6 = 33.

Knowing how much water to apply to lawns is a question many homeowners ask. Using data collected by local weather stations and information on evapo-transpiration of plants, calculations can be made to determine the amount of water needed for warm season grasses in our area.

Following proper cultural practices when caring for your lawn will result in a healthier, better looking yard - using fewer chemicals and fertilizer, and less water. As an added bonus, cutting back will result in saving you money.

Zinc for the Pecan Tree

If you do nothing else to care for your pecans trees, water them regularly and apply zinc applications throughout the early growing season. There are two methods for applying zinc. The 'nut gurus' for the most part tell us we can either apply zinc sulfate to the soil beneath the tree drip line or spray your tree foliage with zinc.

To zinc your pecan trees with my preferred method, you will, of course, need a sprayer of some sort. If you have only a few trees, or if you have a whole orchard of young, small trees, you may opt for an inexpensive pump sprayer, although sooner or later, you will find it necessary to 'move up' to a more efficient and easier to use mechanical sprayer.

Whatever sprayer you choose to spray your zinc with, keep in mind that you will either need a high volume of pressure to reach to top parts of your pecan trees, or will need 'some height' to elevate you and the sprayer to a level of your trees' branches. If you choose a smaller sprayer, you may find that riding in the back of a pickup up and down your orchard rows will work nicely. Make sure you follow the mixing directions on the label.

Ah yes, the zinc solution. Zinc Sulfate can easily be found at most home and garden stores in quantities as small as one pound. It is a powder that dissolves well in water, and a little actually goes a very long way in terms of applying it to your trees. Liquid Zinc is also available, however it tends to crystallize over a period of time

Fertilizer won't help if plant is stressed or if growing conditions are wrong

by Deborah Benge Frost
Fertilizers are in chemical or organic forms. Organic fertilizers include blood meal, fish meal, sewage sludge, cottonseed meal, fish emulsion and compost. Most organic fertilizers need to be decomposed to release nutrients.

Chemical fertilizers can be readily available for plant use or they may need to be converted to a plant-available form. Some fertilizers are purposely formulated with a slow-release nitrogen, which is a superior way to fertilize lawns and other plants. There should be at least 50 percent of the nitrogen in a slow-release form.

To ascertain what nutrients the soil needs, tests can be conducted by the County Extension office. Samples can be mailed to Texas AgriLife Extension Service. Results include nutrient levels, total salinity and soil pH as well as a recommendation of what nutrients are needed.

Nitrogen is usually low in our soils. It can be supplied by using slow-release nitrogen, ammonium sulphate (21-0-0), urea, blood meal and several other sources. Lawns, fruit trees, nut trees, hybrid vegetables, flowering annuals and container cultures are examples of plants that may need to be fertilized to remain healthy, vigorous

and productive.

Phosphorus usually is high or excessive in our soils. Excessive amounts of phosphorus can induce iron and zinc deficiencies. So, go easy or avoid phosphorus- containing fertilizers.

Phosphorus often is unavailable in the spring, so small amounts can be placed just below the seed row or transplant. Once the soil warms up, plenty should be available.

Where steady healthy growth is needed, compost and organic mulch can act like a slow-release fertilizer. The mulch and organic mulch will slowly decompose and release nutrients to the soil.

Fertilizer is not a fix all. If a plant is stressed, has marginal growing conditions, improper light or water, fertilizer won't make up the difference. Fertilizer can easily make matters worse. So, read the label, apply at the right rates, apply to moist soil and water it in.

Why Compost?

Today, solid waste management is one of the most prominent environmental issues facing Texas and many other states throughout the nation. Our landfills are filling up at an alarming rate.

Organic landscape materials, including leaves, woody trimmings and grass clippings often contribute significantly to a communities' annual solid waste. During peak leafdrop in fall when residents are bagging and placing leaves curbside, organic materials may account for as much as 50% of the incoming landfill volume.

The irony is that, with the exception of large woody brush, residents can recycle all their organic materials right in their own yards through composting, mulching and grasscycling. By recycling these materials, we're not just saving our landfill space but also improving our home environment. Organic matter adds valuable nutrients back to the soil, improves the condition of our soils, helps insulate the soil from temperature extremes, and helps plants survive dry periods by holding moisture in our soils.

As concerned citizens and good stewards of the environment, it's time to take action and stop throwing out what we can recycle and reuse. It's time we stopped classifying organic materials as waste and see them as Mother Nature intended...an important link in the web of life, whose death and decay brings newness of life and beauty to our environment.

Compost is the controlled decomposition of organic matter through biological processes, with the end result being a nutrient-rich humus. The word 'compost' is derived from the Latin verb *componere* which means to put together. Composting involves the putting together of a mixture of vegetable residue, animal matter, soil and water to form humus. Just as variety is the spice of life, a variety of different organic materials makes the best compost.

Composting is one way we can manage and recycle our organic landscape materials and manufacturing humus for improving our soils. Composting will also reduce the volume of organic materials by about 80% as they decay. Every resident who has a landscape should also be composting organic materials. It may be done as simply as piling organic materials in an out-of-the-way place in the backyard and letting them rot on their own. Or you may want to build or purchase a compost bin that will accelerate the composting process. Compost will improve the productivity of your soil and the growth of plants in your landscape and garden.

Composting is the cornerstone of waste source reduction. Source reduction means putting less stuff on the curb for the garbage man to pick up and deliver to the landfill.

Deadheading

High summer temperatures also have an effect on plants after dark because of high nighttime temperatures, which can cause high plant respiration rates during the evening hours when plants are unable to photosynthesize. Plants use more food energy than they can produce in the daylight hours through photosynthesis, so they deplete most of their food reserves. This puts plants in a vulnerable situation.

Flowering plants will fare better if they are kept deadheaded, the removal of fading flower heads before they make seed. Seed production is an energy-draining process that can deplete a plant of most its food reserves, which can kill the plant. Deadheading will conserve the plant's food energies and lead to more blooming.

Fruiting plants are in the same boat. Keep harvesting fruiting vegetables -- those with seeds inside -- so the plants will continue to flower and fruit. Deadheading is easily done with a pair of sharp shears or hand pruners. The stem can be cut above a big, healthy leaf. New growth or another stalk will come from the bud located in the leaf axil. Deadheading diverts plant energy into growth and more flowering rather than seed maturation. Even if you get behind and the vegetables are too large for use, go ahead and harvest. Okra, squash or other vegetables will stop producing if they are not harvested on a timely basis.

A generous layer of mulch will help plants perform better as the temperatures get higher. Not only does the mulch help keep the soil moisture from evaporating, it also keeps soil temperatures lower and it suppresses weed growth. Organic mulch will also decompose over time, adding humus and nutrients to the soil. If you have to sprinkle-irrigate plants, do so early or late in the day to reduce salt burn. Sprinkle irrigating in hot, dry, low humidity, windy conditions can burn leaves, reducing their ability to function correctly. The burning worsens with water that has a higher salt content; the higher the content, the greater the damage.

Fertilizers are also salts so they put an extra burden on plants, especially if too much is applied.

Fertilizers increase the water demands of plants and push them to grow. Modest amounts, slower-release fertilizer or just the use of compost and organic mulches will supply some nutrients but not overly push plants to grow. The plant's survival and health will be much better.

Texas Master Gardener Program

Many people have approached me about starting a master gardener program in the Ft. Stockton area. The Master Gardener Program is a volunteer development program offered by Texas AgriLife Extension Service and is designed to increase the availability of horticultural information and improve the quality of life through horticultural projects. Program objectives are implemented through the training and "employing" local volunteers, known as Master Gardeners. They aid Extension by conducting school garden projects; answering telephone requests for horticultural information; establishing and maintaining demonstration gardens; working with special audiences in the community; and designing and implementing community improvement projects, as well as coordinating Master Gardener projects. I am putting together data on the demand for this program. If this sounds like something you are really interested in being a part of please contact the Pecos County Agrilife Extension Office at 432-336-2541.

Upcoming Events

June 8 and 10, 6:00pm EarthKind Compost Program - At CAF Airpower Heritage Museum. No charge but you must pre-register by calling 432-498-4071. Free compost bin, manual, worms (optional) and other composting goodies. Two evening series. Combines classroom instruction and outdoor workshop.

Tuesday, May 18, 2010 Landscape Tour in Odessa Garden Design and Skills Tour Series Registration is free, but limited to the first 40 people who call or email. Register by calling 432-498-4071 or email Dbenge@ag.tamu.edu. Specific locations will be given at time of registration. All Tours scheduled for 7pm to 8pm.

Thursday, May 20, 2010 Landscape Tour in Midland Garden Design and Skills Tour Series Registration is free, but limited to the first 40 people who call or email. Register by calling 432-498-4071 or email Dbenge@ag.tamu.edu. Specific locations will be given at time of registration. All Tours scheduled for 7pm to 8pm.

R. Norman Fryar
Agriculture/Natural Resource
Texas AgriLife Extension Service
P.O. Box 1357
100 E. Division
Fort Stockton, TX 79735
Phone: 432-336-2541
Fax: 432-336-6107