

Catholic Cemeteries – Caretaker Notes

Lawn Care

Early April is generally the time when we see a gradual warming of the weather. While some lot owners and visitors may be eager about a jump start on the cemetery's lawn care program, it's important to make sure the timing is right.

Mowing – The general rule for cool-season turfs is to mow when the grass gets one-third taller than its recommended height. In other words, the rule is never to cut off more than a third of the grass height. So long as you don't scalp it, cutting grass short doesn't hurt for the first mowing or two.



In fact, it can speed green-up by removing old, dead grass and allowing the soil to warm up faster. After that, however, short turf encourages crabgrass and other weed seeds to germinate. In fact, you can get significant weed control by doing no more than raising your cutting height.

The best cutting range for most lawns is two to three inches.

Short mowing harms root systems. Mowing the lawn short encourages fescue and bluegrass turf to develop shallow, less drought resistant root systems that can be perilous for the lawn come summer time. Mowing height and root depth are directly related.

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LEAVE LAWN CLIPPINGS WHERE THEY FALL

Leaving the lawn clippings where they fall is an environmentally sound practice that benefits everyone. We don't have to buy large plastic bags and we don't have to stop the lawn mower every second or third row to empty the bagger into plastic bags and pick up what falls on the ground. It should take one third less time to mow the lawn. Plus, we can save up to 25% of our fertilizer costs and feed the lawn a minute amount of fertilizer each time we mow it. So we're saving time, money and helping the environment!

Some arguments about picking up clippings can be convincing, but when you look into them they're not practical. A common misconception is that leaving clippings adds to thatch build-up. That's not true. Clippings have no effect on thatch build-up. Some grasses produce it and others don't. You won't find any thatch on tall fescues or perennial ryegrasses. Another concern is that clippings smother and kill the grass. If large clumps of grass clippings are left on the lawn that could happen, but clippings less than 1 inch long decompose rapidly.

Additional benefits to recycling lawn clippings include reduced weed problems, modification of soil temperature and moisture, maintenance of good soil structure and improved soil fertility.

Controlling dandelions – Dandelions, chickweed and henbit are cool season broadleaf weeds that appear during lawn green-up in the spring. The dandelions are similar to fescue and bluegrass in that spring is when they devote most energy to developing new leaves.

Applying broad leaf weed controls is less effective in spring than in fall. A spring herbicide spray probably will kill the weeds' leaves. But because the plants are routing much of what they absorb into their root system, those roots often survive and simply send up new shoots to replace the leaves lost. Generations ago, the practice was to dig up the dandelion in the spring – it was completed for "root and all". Spraying can increase the odds of success if applied when weeds are small and actively growing."

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Fertilizing – Cool-season grasses benefit most from fertilizer applied in fall. Early spring feedings can actually hurt, rather than help fescue and bluegrass lawn health.

Fertilizing in March or early April nearly always causes excessive top growth. This growth leads to frequent mowing, and it promotes both diseases and weeds. It can also prevent healthy root growth that cool-season turfs need to survive summer stresses.

If a spring fertilization application is necessary, it is best to delay it until May. Even then a slow-release nitrogen source is recommended. The goal is to avoid a cool-season lawn from growing fast when hot weather sets in.

Crabgrass prevention – Crabgrass and foxtail are among the annual lawn weeds that grow from seed each spring. After they sprout, these weeds can be hard to control. In the weeks before they emerge, however, a properly timed herbicide application can stop crabgrass and foxtail in their tracks. The herbicide application works best during the period with redbud trees' budding out and ends with their reaching full bloom. Depending on the product used, lawns may need a second application to extend the control.

(Barricade and Dimension have a longer residual effect than traditional crabgrass controls. If applied in late fall, Barricade can still provide season-long crabgrass control the following year.. Dimension has the extra benefit of being the only crabgrass preventer that also kills the weed's seeding after they have germinated.)

Seed not Sod – Our landscaping field manager periodically reviews the lawn area for all sections. Problems are identified and a solution is often readily available to produce a healthier and hardier lawn. Catholic Cemeteries maintain lawn sprinklers throughout our properties. Seed is the preferred method to lawn germination. Sod retention or sod as replacement is not recommended due to seasonal factors as well as ground settlement process that follows most interments.

When families opt to sod a lawn themselves and the lawn is removed for burial in that lot or even in a case of working on an adjacent lot the cemetery restores the area with seed (not sod).

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