

Brookfield Village Lawn Care Tips by Jeff Johnson

Although I spent 9 years in lawn care, my lawn is certainly not the best in looking. Since moving to BV in 2001, it's been a yearly challenge and I've learned something new each year. Here are some helpful tips that will hopefully make your lawn maintenance easier and improve your curb appeal.



The Problems: Moss, Bare Spots, Thin Grass, Thatch, Weeds

Unfortunately, the builders left us with a lot of acidic clay and rock instead of nice rich soil. All of your attempts for a great lawn are for naught if you don't take care of the soil first.

Clay Soil:

Clay soil is naturally acidic. Grass can tolerate a wide range of Ph from 5.5 to 7.5 with 6.5 (just slightly acidic) being the best. You can buy a soil test kit from most home stores, garden centers or the internet. I recommend taking samples from some spots that are doing well and spots that are not doing well to gauge the range of your Ph. You may have a wide range within your own lawn due to where the builders placed what was dug out to make your basement. Also, if your neighbor has a nice looking lawn, ask if you can check their Ph for comparison.

Quick Lawn Care Tips:

- **Test your soil Ph**
- **Rake, aerate, thatch**
- **Seed with good quality seed**
- **Fertilize and consider organic products**
- **Keep it long, mow no more than 1/3**
- **Sharpen the blade often**
- **Water early– 1/2 to 1 inch per week**

Step1-Soil Prep:

- Test the soil Ph from different areas of the lawn. Moss likes acidic soil between 5 and 5.5, which is lower than the 6.5 preferred by your grass. Dandelions prefer alkaline soil– usually 7.5 or higher. Test a neighbor's to compare.
- If your soil is compacted and dense, your efforts will not give you the results you need. Start with a good metal rake and rake up any moss and thatch that are preventing nutrients from getting into your soil. By the way, mulching your grass clippings does not cause thatch. Dead roots, shallow roots, over fertilization cause thatch and it is normal to need to remove it once in a while.
- Get your lawn aerated. This removing of plugs helps break up the soil and allows nutrients get down to where you want them to go. Once a year is usually fine, but your lawn may need it twice if it is really compacted.
- Adjusting the Ph can be done by applying lime to your lawn. This does not mean sharing a margarita with your lawn, although that could be a good reward for your hard work! This will not produce immediate results- it could take 4-6 months. Ask an expert at the garden center, consult the internet for other products as well, or call Scott's helpline for suggestions.
- Depending on the condition of your soil, you may want to put a 1 to 2 inch top dressing of good quality soil on your lawn. This will work its way into the holes created by aeration.

Usually these steps are best done in the fall because of the cool and wet weather, but spring time is fine as well.

Step2- Seed, Feed and Weed:

Now that your soil is properly prepared, you have a decision to make. You either need to seed your bare areas or work to keep weeds from filling in first. Either way, your lawn will need some food. Note: You can't use crab grass preventer with grass seed. If you do, you'll have to wait until fall to re-seed otherwise it will kill the grass seed. If you really need to seed, my recommendation is to use starter fertilizer designed to get the roots healthy and nurture new grass. It won't have any weed killer in it, so if you plant new seed, it won't kill the seed. This way you can get the grass growing, mow 3 times and then spot treat the crab grass with liquid weed killer.

Patching kits work well too, but are usually more expensive since you're paying for the stuff that holds the seed down versus just straight seed. Since most of our lawns were planted in the late 1980's and 1990's, it's always good to add some new seed with updated genes each year to help fill in bare spots and conserve water.

Seeding is one of those things I never thought had a real method. I always spread seed like I'm feeding imaginary chickens- just throw it here and there. I recently found out that it's best to follow the recommendations on the bag and use a spreader. If you put down too much seed in one area, the seeds compete for water and nutrients and none survive because there is not enough to go around. Who knew?! So, go light on the seed, work it into the dirt and keep it moist each day. Just water in the day's dew with a sprinkle and it should be fine.

If your lawn is somewhat thick, but just has a moss problem, test Ph, treat with the lime as mentioned above and seek out moss control fertilizer. Scott's makes some, but it's not sold at all home centers. I have found it at the Roush hardware stores (161 and Frantz is the closest).

Not all weed killers are created equally. Some are not for use on lawns and some may not kill the weeds you want gone. Check the label and use online resources or garden center to help identify weed types if you can't tell what you have. It's been my experience that it is hard to get consistent results with the granular fertilizer with weed killer built in. You have to apply when the grass is just slightly damp so it sticks to the weed leaves. Getting this just right is challenging and spreading fertilizer on a wet lawn is downright messy. Instead, use normal fertilizer for that time of year and spot treat with liquid. It's much more effective.

Generally, fertilize every 6-8 weeks for a healthy happy lawn. Even in the summer when your lawn starts to dry out, it really needs food. Keep on this schedule to give it a fighting chance.

Consider Organic products allow your pets and kids to play on the grass without worry of chemicals or tracking it into the house.

Please be considerate, sweep or blowing excess fertilizer from drives and walks. Not only is it bad for kids and pets to track into the house, it can be corrosive to the concrete and contaminate our rivers and lakes when it washes off.

Step3- Watering:

A lot of people (including me) envy that beautiful fairway at the golf course. Unfortunately, the grounds maintenance techniques used at the golf course do not translate well to our lawns. Short watering nearly every day is not that effective and can get expensive. Most experts suggest watering 1-2 times per week with about ½ to 1 inch of water. This is much better than several small watering throughout the week.

Why? First, golf course grass is a different variety than lawn grass. Healthy lawns need long roots that can extract nutrients and water in several inches of soil. By giving short small watering, you're training your grass to absorb water at the top of the ground so the roots become very shallow and are easily damaged by the sun (and contribute to thatch when they die). Only if you water consistently each day will you keep the top 4-6 inches of your soil wet enough. It's better to give it longer less frequent watering!

Because we have clay soil, too much water too fast may just run off. Move the sprinkler around to let one area soak in before going back to it. A simple water tester for house plants can tell you how deep the water goes. You can also take a pie tin, small bucket or other container to determine how much water you are really giving the lawn. Just set it out when you water.

Watering is best done early in the morning. You can water in the dew and have some time for it to soak in before the heat of the day. If you do it during the hottest part of the day, you waste a lot of water to evaporation. Plus, you end up steaming the grass. If you have to, watering at night is an option. I do this because of my schedule, but it can lead to mold problems so keep an eye out for dusty mold on your grass.

Step4- Mowing:

OK, your soil has been prepared, you've fed and seeded, you've watered, now it's time to mow. You weren't thinking of using that, dull rusty blade on your beautiful new grass, were you?!?!

Think of getting a haircut: you're hair is wet and the barber/stylist comes at you with some dull, rusty scissors. Not going to be a pretty cut, right?

You need to sharpen the blade regularly. Once per season is not enough. Get a good sharpen at the beginning of the season and touch up regularly with a fine metal file. Some people keep 2-3 blades around, get them sharpened all at once and change them out during the season. Pinecones, mulch and sticks will dull the blade fast. If you have jagged brown tips on your grass, you probably need to get it sharpened. A dull blade rips more than it cuts and will cause the grass to dry out easier.

The rule of thumb is to cut off no more than 1/3 of the lawn at one time. If you do, it can shock the grass or leave the ground and roots exposed to the sun. Some grass varieties, like those on the golf course green are happy to be cut every day and cut short. Bluegrass, rye and fescue varieties in our lawns do not thrive when cut short. They might look good during the spring, but it's not good for the long-term health of the lawn. The longer the grass, the more likely the grass roots are to work their way deep into your soil where you want them to be. Short mowing expose the roots and soil to direct sun light. This can dry out the grass and soil much faster than if it is shielded by longer blades. Consider using the highest one or two levels on your mower to ensure the right height.

Do you always mow your lawn the same direction each time? Consider changing your mowing pattern from week to week. The lawn starts to fall in the direction it is mowed if done repetitively, just like parting your hair. Alternate across with north/south, east/west, diagonal or any crazy pattern you wish. Just change

it up.

What time of day do you mow? Most of us squeeze it in when convenient. Some like to work on their tan at the same time. Some need headlights to get it done by dark. If possible, don't mow at the hottest time of the day or when the grass is wet. Your lawn will be much healthier if you mow it after the hottest part of the day. Mowing when wet can rip the grass and mowing during the heat of the day will make the water in the blades quickly evaporate as the tips are cut, thus drying out the lawn.

Please, be considerate and sweep or blow grass off your sidewalk so it doesn't stain or discolor the concrete.

Do you have some tips? E-mail bvhainfo@yahoo.com and we'll get them posted at www.bvha.info!

Helpful Links:

www.scotts.com

Dandelion Info: <http://greennature.com/article2600.html>

Mowing Info: <http://www.scotts.com/smg/connect/blogs/blogLawn.jsp?navId=page900087&parentId=600011&plckController=Blog&plckScript=blogScript&plckElementId=blogDest&plckBlogPage=BlogViewPost&plckPostId=Blog%3a456d22c7-49eb-4200-a29d-7bfdcb3eeb8fPost%3a1c008910-2ad4-4f50-bcfd-77075cdb3532>

Soil Test Info:

<http://www.scotts.com/smg/connect/blogs/blogLawn.jsp?navId=page900087&parentId=600011&plckController=Blog&plckScript=blogScript&plckElementId=blogDest&plckBlogPage=BlogViewPost&plckPostId=Blog%3A456d22c7-49eb-4200-a29d-7bfdcb3eeb8fPost%3Ab21127eb-6224-4912-a663-17021b611ff2>

Removing Moss:

<http://doyourownlawn care.wordpress.com/2007/04/27/how-do-you-remove-moss-from-a-lawn/>