

Fertilize your Florida lawn correctly

Many people fertilize their lawn too early. The first fertilizer application for our warm season lawngrasses such as St. Augustinegrass, centipedegrass, zoysiagrass and bermudagrass should not be until April. Some fertilizer elements are poorly available to your lawn's roots under cool soil conditions. Fertilizing while the soil is too cool can result in nutrient deficiencies such as iron deficiency causing yellow areas in the lawn. Fertilizing too early can result in injury to your lawn's roots from fertilizer burn. Or tender growth promoted by an early fertilizer application may be injured by a late frost or freeze. So, have patience, allow your lawn to completely green up on its own and then fertilize, even if it's not until April or May.

Many people use fertilizers with the wrong ratio of nitrogen to potassium. Our lawns need almost the same amount of potassium as compared to nitrogen. Getting this right can make a difference in the long term health of your lawn. Look for a lawn fertilizer with an analysis such as 8-0-8, 10-0-10, 15-0-15, 18-0-18, 15-2-15, 16-0-8, 16-4-8, 20-0-11, etc. You may find other lawn fertilizers with similar numbers. Look for a fertilizer with a 1:1 or 2:1 ratio of nitrogen to potassium. These numbers provide the buyer important information. The first number is the percent nitrogen (N), the second number is the percent phosphorus (P) and the third number is the percent potassium (K). Of the three primary nutrients (N, P and K), potassium is second only to nitrogen in utilization by lawngrass. Adequate potassium has been linked to reduced disease problems, drought and cold tolerance and enhanced root growth.

Some people use fertilizers with too much phosphorus. Lawn grasses use much less phosphorus than nitrogen or potassium. Because of this and because phosphorus has been implicated as a cause for problems in our surface waters, it's recommended to base phosphorus rates on the results of a reliable soil test. In absence of soil test results, select a fertilizer with 2% or less phosphorus such as 15-2-15, 8-0-8, 16-0-8, etc. For a newly planted lawn on a new site, you may choose a fertilizer such as 15-5-15 or 16-4-8 but only when a soil test indicates a need for extra phosphorus.

Many homeowners fertilize too late in the year. The latest month to fertilize our warm season lawngrasses in North Florida as recommended by University of Florida turfgrass researchers is September. If you have centipedegrass, it's recommended to fertilize no later than July.

For more information on how to grow a Florida lawn, contact your UF/IFAS County Extension Office or visit <http://yourfloridalawn.ifas.ufl.edu>.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County, February 25, 2009