Fertilize your lawn with the right numbers

Improve your lawn and the environment by using lawn fertilizers with the right numbers.

Many lawn fertilizers have too much nitrogen and too little potassium. A common example is 27-3-3. These numbers represent the percent nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K), respectively. In the above example there’s a lot more nitrogen (27%) than potassium (3%). Despite the fact it’s readily available, this is not a good choice for a Florida lawn.

A 27-3-3 fertilizer has a 9:1 ratio of nitrogen to potassium. It’s better to select a fertilizer where the first and third numbers are equal or close to equal and the center number is very low. A few examples found locally include 8-4-8, 8-2-10, 10-4-10, 12-2-14, 13-3-13, 15-0-15, 16-2-16 and 18-0-18.

You may be able to produce a nice lawn for three, four, five years or so using a high nitrogen and low potassium fertilizer. But at some point in time, your lawn will suffer and probably decline. This is the misleading part and when this happens, most people blame mole crickets or something else. They never realize the true cause for the sudden decline in their lawn. The excess nitrogen creates a nice green lawn short term (for a few years). But the lawn is dependent on adequate amounts of potassium and other essential plant nutrients, which are not provided by a 27-3-3 or similar analysis fertilizer. As a result, the lawn declines with time.

Of the three primary nutrients (N, P and K), potassium is second only to nitrogen in utilization by lawns. Adequate potassium has been linked to reduced disease problems, improved drought and cold tolerance and enhanced root growth.

Lawn grasses use much less phosphorus (center number) than nitrogen and/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 the absence of a soil test, select a fertilizer with 2% or less phosphorus. For a newly planted lawn, you may choose something like 8-4-8 or 10-4-10 when a soil test indicates a need for extra phosphorus.

Finally, look for slow release lawn fertilizers. It’s best to purchase a lawn fertilizer with at least half the nitrogen in a slow release (water insoluble) form. Also look for fertilizers that contain at least one percent iron as well as a little manganese and magnesium.

We have a list of fertilizer mixes available in Okaloosa County. We can mail you a copy or you can access it on our website at [http://okaloosa.ifas.ufl.edu](http://okaloosa.ifas.ufl.edu), click on “Horticulture” and then click on “Fertilizer Chart.”

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