



YardScaping - LAWNS

Keep it small. Shrink your lawn size to what you really need. Add trees, shrubs, perennials, groundcovers along property lines. Change to vegetable gardens and natural meadows. Less lawn reduces water and air pollution, water usage, time, money and maintenance.

Get a soil test. For \$12 and a box of your dirt, you can find out your soil's secrets: fertility, pH and how to adjust them. Maine soils are typically too acid for lawn grass. If your test confirms this, sweeten the soil with pelletized limestone. Test kits are available at county Cooperative Extension and Soil & Water Conservation District offices.

Select suitable seed. Because no turf grass is native to Maine, choose a grass most adapted to your site. Look for blends that need little fertilizer or water. These "lower input" blends contain fine or tall fescues. Consider the new low or no mow mixes. Or, try one with clover (a good source of nitrogen). If you have an existing lawn, overseed with these less-work varieties.

Time your seeding. Best seeding dates are mid August through mid September. Next best are May through mid June.

Measure your sunlight. Grass needs a minimum of six hours of direct sunlight. For shady areas, no sun equals no grass. Consider an ornamental groundcover like ajuga or pachysandra or use native groundcovers like bunchberry, partridgeberry or wintergreen.

Mow high. Raise the mower blade to three inches. Root growth is only as deep as the grass blade is high. Mowing higher promotes root growth, reduces weeds by 50 to 80 percent, helps lawns through dry periods and discourages insects. A credit card is a handy gauge—just over three inches long.

Mow often. Be sure you never remove more than one third of the leaf blade. For instance, mow to 3 inches when grass reaches 4.5 inches. Cutting off more shocks and weakens each grass plant.

Mow sharp. Keep mower blades sharp to prevent water loss and fungal disease. Do the finger test. If it doesn't crease your finger when you press on the blade, it's not sharp enough.

Grass-cycle. Don't deny your lawn a free lunch—leave your grass clippings behind. They provide turf with a helping of nitrogen, and decrease weeds and water loss by acting as a natural mulch. Mulching mowers chop grass into fine bits that are less likely to mat.

Water wisely. Lawns need an inch to an inch and a half of water per week. Use the footprint test: if blades stay compressed for more than a few seconds, it's hose time. Water slowly and deeply to train the grass roots down. Best time: 6-10 a.m.

Don't let pests bug you. Before you swat, stamp or spray, use common sense pest control. Let "some weeds and insects are okay" be your mantra. Try growing endophyte enhanced (insect resistant) grasses, pulling weeds by hand, fighting bugs with bugs (unleashing parasitic nematodes can work for grub control) and if using pesticides, spot treat only.

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Core aerate. Help your lawn breathe. Thatch buildup and soil compaction restricts the air and water grass needs. The best method is core aeration, where plugs of thatch and soil are removed. Core aerators can be rented and many lawn care companies offer this service. Core aerate in the fall followed by a sprinkling or “overseeding” of low input grass mix. This is a great way to gradually change the character of your lawn.

Fertilize but skip the phosphorous. Lawn fertilizers can impact water quality. Use fine or tall fescue grass mixes that need little or no fertilizer to stay healthy and fight off weeds. If you do fertilize: use phosphorus-free fertilizer unless planting new seed, apply late August to mid November, and buy fertilizer with *water insoluble*, *slow release* or *controlled release nitrogen* printed on the package. Otherwise, the nitrogen—the nutrient that makes grass greener—is washed away by rain or watering before it’s used, wasting your time and money, and may end up in your drinking water.

For more lawn tips, visit www.yardscaping.org.