

Non-Chemical Lawn Care in Alaska

Proper Site Selection

Not all Alaska yards are appropriate for the establishment of lawns without chemicals. If the area is too shaded, gets too much standing water, or has sandy, rocky or compact soil, you are likely to be disappointed. Lawns that are shaded, that get too much surface moisture, have poor drainage, or have compacted soil will get moss and too many weeds.

Cultivar Selection

Choose the best variety of grass for Alaska. When selecting grass seed for your lawn, the best choice is usually Alaska Nugget bluegrass. There are many other varieties that will do well in Alaska, depending on your site, however only cultivars developed for the Alaska climate are likely to do the best. These include; Nugget bluegrass, Merion bluegrass, Park bluegrass, Arctared fescue, and Boreal fescue. There are also good sources of cut sod in Alaska, including one organically produced source of sod in the Mat-Su Valley.

Soil Test

A soil test will tell you what nutrients your soil requires. Most garden centers can provide some sort of soil test or you can buy a do-it-yourself test kit. A lawn care company or the University Extension Service can provide a more thorough test for nutrients, pH, and organic matter. You will have to request that organic recommendations be made, or make your own organic interpretation of the test results.

Mow high

- Set mower blades to 3 inches.

Growing your lawn taller is an excellent way to reduce herbicide use.

Tall grass:

- Is more stress tolerant and can withstand dry summers better.
- Has a larger root structure, which increases uptake of water and nutrients;
- Provides shade-reducing weed seed germination, particularly quack grass.

The first cut in the spring and the last cut in the fall should be 2 inches. In the spring this removes any winter fungus and in the fall prevents fungus from getting established during the winter. If snow mold is a problem use one tablespoon of baking soda per gallon of water with a ¼ teaspoon of Dr. Bronner's liquid castile soap per gallon of water and spray it on the effected areas.

Give The Grass a Clean Cut

- Keep your mower blade sharp; mow with an old-fashioned push-pull mower that is kept razor sharp and is pollution free and is good exercise too.
- Mow when the grass is dry;
- Mow in the cool part of the afternoon or evening.

A dull blade can cause the tip of the grass to shred, giving the lawn a brown appearance as the tips dry out making the grass more susceptible to disease. Cutting the grass when wet will also shred the blade because there is less friction against the mower blade and wet grass clippings can become anaerobic causing loss of beneficial microbes.

Mulch Clippings

- Leave grass clippings on the lawn.

Mulching reduces the need for fertilizer since important plant nutrients are returned to the soil. A mulching mower circulates the grass clippings in the mowing chamber to produce smaller clippings which break down more easily.

Wise Watering

- Turn on sprinklers or set timers to water between midnight and 8 a.m.;
- Water deeply and only when needed (every few days, not every day);
- Cancel a scheduled watering if a recent rainfall has occurred;
- If a fertilizer has just been applied, only water the lawn lightly.

Proper watering ensures a denser lawn and allows the turf to compete more effectively with weeds. A healthy lawn will also reduce disease problems.

Watering should take place before intense sunlight causes too much water to be lost to evaporation. Watering in the early evenings will leave the lawn damp all night, and may increase the lawns susceptibility to fungus and molds. Deep watering encourages deep root growth. However, when fertilizer has just been applied it is better to water lightly to prevent the fertilizer from leaching past the root zone, where it will not be useful to the grass.

Fertilize

- Test your soil; add only the necessary nutrients.
- Use a non-synthetic slow release fertilizer or compost tea for beneficial microbes.

Properly conditioned soil provides vital nutrients to plants, retains water, and supports many micro-organisms and invertebrates. All of these elements are important to growing a healthy lawn without chemicals. Only add the necessary nutrients. Mulching decreases the number of fertilizer applications required, as the grass clippings nourish the soil. In the fall, the grass has stopped significant blade growth, but has increased storage of food in the roots.

Aerate-let the lawn breath

- Aerate the lawn in spring or early fall;
- Leave pulled plugs on the soil surface.

Aeration is the removal of plugs of soil, which allows oxygen to reach the soil and promotes root growth, proper drainage, and loose soil. Aeration also helps prevent thatch-the build up of plant material between the green vegetation and the soil surface. By using non synthetic fertilizers and eliminating the use of chemical pesticides, you will encourage beneficial micro-organisms and earthworms to inhabit the soil. These organisms will naturally create air pockets in the lawn. You can also hire a lawn service or use a core aeration machine. The machine will remove tiny plugs of soil. Leaving the plugs on the soil surface to break down naturally provides the soil and lawn with nutrients.

Weed Control

- Over-seed the lawn in the spring;
- Pull weeds by hand, or use a fish-tail weeder;
- Spot treat weeds with an equal mix of vinegar and water;
- Reseed bare areas where weeds have been pulled.

Over seeding will crowd out competing weeds and ensure a thick, lush lawn. To have a virtually weed-free garden, pull visible weeds before they go to seed, or spot treat by spraying a mix of water and vinegar at the root of the plant. The plant will turn brown and can then be removed. Some weeds, such as dandelions, have a strong root system. Be sure to remove as much of the root as you can. Moistening or lightly watering the soil will make weeds easier to pull. When a weed has been pulled by hand a bare spot may remain where weed seeds can germinate. Deter weeds from moving into this space by seeding with grass. And remember, **no yard is ever completely weed free.**

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