

## TIPS FOR A

# PEST-FREE LAWN

**L**awn grasses brought from the East Coast, where summer rain is frequent, often struggle to survive in Southern California's Mediterranean climate. It's tempting to resort to heavy use of water, fertilizers and pesticides to help them along.

Lawns *can* look beautiful without using pesticides and fertilizers that contribute to water quality problems in the Santa Monica Bay. The tips below will help you maintain a healthy and beautiful lawn that can out-compete weeds and other lawn pests.

### IRRIGATE AN ESTABLISHED LAWN PROPERLY

- Before you irrigate, check the soil moisture with a soil probe or trowel. The top 2" to 3" should feel almost dry before you add more water.

- Water enough to wet the soil 3" to 6" down. Grass roots will grow deeper and the lawn will be healthier.
- After watering, test for water penetration again with the soil probe or trowel. If the soil isn't wet 3" to 6" down, continue watering until it is. Track the watering time so you know about how long to water.
- Irrigate slowly so that water doesn't run off. Overwatering is wasteful and can wash pesticides and fertilizers into the storm drains.
- If water runs off or pools even with slow irrigation, soil compaction may be a problem (see Lawn Aeration on the next page).
- Clay soils hold more moisture and dry out more slowly, thus they may need less frequent irrigation.
- Sandy soils dry out more quickly and may need more frequent irrigation.

### FEED YOUR SOIL BY LEAVING GRASS CLIPPINGS ON THE LAWN

- Grass clippings can provide some of the nutrients needed by a lawn if the clippings are small enough to decom-

pose quickly without forming mats on top of the living grass. Remove only 1/3 of the blade at any one time (see Mow the Right Way, below).

- To decompose clippings, soil must be biologically active, i.e., contain bacteria, fungi, insects, worms, and oxygen. Soil under a lawn that has been heavily fertilized or frequently treated with pesticides may be deficient in these elements.

### MOW THE RIGHT WAY

- Remove no more than 1/3 of the leaf blade at one cutting. Removing more can be very stressful for the plant and increase pest and disease problems.
- Mow when the grass is dry.
- During the summer months, cut the grass higher to help retain soil moisture.
- Keep mower blades sharp. Dull blades wound the grass and make it more vulnerable to pests and diseases.
- Alternate your mowing pattern frequently to avoid compacted ruts.
- Try using a "mulching" mower that cuts grass blades into tiny pieces and blows them back into the lawn.



## DEAL SENSIBLY WITH WEEDS

- Decide how many weeds you can tolerate. It is not realistic to expect a completely weed-free lawn.
- Dig up weeds by hand and sprinkle grass seed on any bare spots so weeds can't fill in. Water regularly with a fine spray until the grass sprouts.
- Keep grass growing vigorously to crowd out weeds. Don't mow grass too short; taller blades can shade the soil enough to prevent some weed seeds from germinating.

## LAWN AERATION

- Aerate spots where you can't push a screwdriver five to six inches into the soil, where water pools, where grass looks thin, or where there is heavy traffic.
- Use a hollow-tined aerator that removes plugs of soil, either a foot-operated or motorized model.
- Irrigate deeply (soil should be moist 5" to 6" down) so you can push the aerator into the soil as far as possible. Allow soil to dry slightly before you begin.
- Leave the plugs on the lawn and break them up with a garden rake.

## DETHATCHING LAWNS

- Thatch is dead and dying, matted grass parts that accumulate on top of the soil. Thatch prevents air, water, and fertilizer from reaching the soil.
- Remove thatch with a rake if more than 1/2" thick.
- Aeration (see above) can help prevent thatch buildup.
- When soil is biologically active, grass clippings decompose and do not contribute to thatch buildup. This is a good reason to minimize or eliminate the use of broad-spectrum pesticides that can destroy soil organisms.

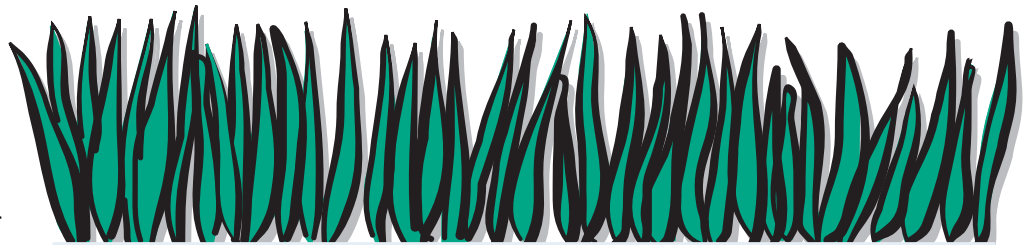
## FERTILIZING

- Unless the soil texture is sandy, nutrient deficiencies are unlikely and you may not need to fertilize at all. If in doubt, have your soil professionally tested.
- Grass clippings left on the lawn can provide most of the fertilizer.
- If you need to fertilize, use natural fertilizers or slow-release fertilizers, such as sulfur- or polymer-coated urea. These products release nutrients slowly over a longer period, allowing the grass to absorb nutrients more efficiently.
- Fertilizers, if misapplied, can kill soil life and ruin soil structure in even the best soils.

## LAWN SUBSTITUTES

Americans spend a great deal of time on their lawns, using an abundance of water, fertilizer, pesticides, and time. If a grass surface is not required, consider replacing all or some of your lawn with an attractive alternative. The following plants require little water and will accept occasional foot traffic:

- Woolly Yarrow (*Achillea tomentosa*) — Plant from seed or small pots in fall/winter, 6" apart; mow in March and July to a height of 2"; yellow flowers. Keep soil on the dry side.
- Caraway-Scented Thyme (*Thymus herba-barona*) — Plant all thymes from flats or small pots, 6" to 8" apart. Mowing is not necessary. Rose-pink flowers in early summer attract bees.
- Creeping Thyme (*Thymus praecox-arcticus*) — Mow to 1 1/2" in July and fertilize; purple flowers in summer attract bees.
- Strawberry Clover (*Trifolium fragiferum*) — Plant from seed in fall; mow to 2" in April, June, August; white to pink flowers in summer attract bees.
- Garden chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*) combined with strawberry clover — Plant chamomile from flats or small pots, 6" to 8" apart. Plant strawberry clover as noted above and mow both ground covers to 2" in April, June, and August. In areas with serious drainage problems, chamomile may not grow. In those spots,



### SOME PREFERRED GRASSES FOR THE SANTA MONICA AREA

#### “Cool Season” Grasses (growing season is during cool weather)

Tall fescue (*Festuca arundinacea*)

Dwarf tall fescue (dwarf varieties of *Festuca arundinacea*)

#### “Warm Season” Grasses (growing season is during warm weather)

Bermudagrass (*Cynodon dactylon*): loses color during cold weather; hybrids need more care

St. Augustinegrass (*Stenotaphrum secundatum*): most shade-tolerant of warm season grasses

Buffalograss (*Buchloe dactyloides*): cannot tolerate shade, dies back in winter



combine the clover with either of the thymes listed above.

- Consider installing synthetic turf. Products designed specifically for residential applications have recently been introduced which look, feel and perform almost exactly like a lawn, but require no water and no mowing. They can also be installed in full shade and never have weeds!

## PLANTING A NEW LAWN

### START OUT RIGHT

- Have your soil professionally tested so you know the texture, pH, and salt and nutrient levels.
- Choose a mixture of the right varieties of grass suited to your climate and the conditions in your yard (see Preferred Grasses for the Santa Monica area).
- Choose pest- and disease-resistant varieties (ask your nursery).
- Choose sod that has been propagated in soil similar to your own.

### PREPARE THE SOIL BEFORE

#### INSTALLING A NEW LAWN

- Don't work the soil when it is very wet. You can damage its structure.
- Thoroughly mix soil layers of different textures before planting. Poor soil preparation can cause poor drainage resulting in weak turf.
- Break up all clods into fine particles and remove pebbles and stones.
- Check for low spots by irrigating. Smooth out areas where you see puddles (very important if you are seeding a lawn).

### IRRIGATE A NEW LAWN CAREFULLY

- Be sure to keep the soil under a new lawn thoroughly moist until the lawn becomes established, but don't drown the plants. Too much water can also wash away seeds.

## WHITE GRUBS



Santa Monica area lawns sometimes suffer from white grubs, the larval (immature) stage of several species of beetle. The genus of beetles most common in the Santa Monica area is *Cyclocephala*, the masked chafer. Masked chafer adults do not eat, but in their grub stage can cause patches of lawn to die when they feed on grass roots.

Birds, moles, raccoons, opossums, and skunks can add to the damage when they dig in the turf looking for tasty grubs. But just finding wilted patches of grass or animals digging in the lawn does not mean that you have white grubs! You need to find grubs by verifying their presence in several places.

### DETECTION

The C-shaped grubs can be up to an inch long and are white with a brown head and three pairs of conspicuous legs.

Damage from grubs can begin to show as early as June or July or as late as August or September and can be mistaken for wilted grass under drought stress. Later, irregular patches die and can be lifted up or rolled back like a carpet. Grub feeding can make the ground feel spongy.

If you have had white grub problems before or suspect you have them this year, begin looking in mid-May by using a cylindrical bulb planting tool to extract a core of lawn so you can examine the roots. Pay particular attention to spots that look unusual.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Pay special attention to drainage and compaction. Healthy lawns can recover more easily from white grub damage.
- Products with imidacloprid may be used to control grubs. This material has a low acute toxicity to mammals. However, if the insecticide becomes as popular as diazinon was, its use also may lead to water quality impacts. The best approach for grub control is to maintain a healthy lawn without using insecticides.
- Don't treat late in the season when you find dead patches of turf. By this time grubs have done all their damage for the season and are ready to stop eating. Treating now is fruitless. Remove the dead grass, cultivate, and reseed the area.
- Plant warm season grasses, such as bermudagrass, St. Augustinegrass, or buffalograss, or cool season grasses, such as tall or dwarf fescues. These grasses are more tolerant of white grubs.
- Apply beneficial nematodes (*Heterorhabditis bacteriophora*) in late spring before adult beetles emerge, or in mid summer to early fall when larvae are maturing. Nematodes must be applied when the soil temperature is between 60°F and 90°F and the soil is moist. Irrigate the soil before and after application, but don't soak the area. Nematodes need moisture to move around in the soil and to prevent their bodies from dehydrating. Apply nematodes in early evening to minimize damage from UV light. Avoid using fertilizers 2 weeks before and 2 weeks after the application.

Choose a reputable supplier. To make sure nematodes are alive, place a small quantity of the nematode-containing material in water and observe whether they are moving. Look closely because the nematodes are very small. A hand lens or magnifying glass will make it easier to see them. For more information, see the web sites listed on the back page.



## PRODUCTS AND RESOURCES

### Soils Laboratory (see also the Yellow Pages)

Wallace Laboratories  
365 Coral Circle  
El Segundo, CA 90245  
(310) 615-0116  
www.bettersoils.com

### Slow Release Fertilizer

Vigoro® Lawn Fertilizer  
Ringer® Lawn Restore

### Beneficial Nematodes (*Heterorhabditis bacteriophora*)

Rincon-Vitova Insectaries  
P.O. Box 1555  
Ventura, CA 93002  
(805) 248-2847  
Buena BioSystems  
P.O. Box 4008  
Ventura, CA 93007  
(805) 525-2525

For more information on how to apply nematodes see [www.oardc.ohio-state.edu/nematodes/default.htm](http://www.oardc.ohio-state.edu/nematodes/default.htm) or [www.hort.uconn.edu/ipm/homegrnd/htmls/39nemat.htm](http://www.hort.uconn.edu/ipm/homegrnd/htmls/39nemat.htm)

### Synthetic Turf

Back Nine Greens  
79399 Paseo del Rey  
La Quinta, CA 92253  
(800) 583-6619

### Recommended Reading

*Down to Earth Natural Lawn Care*, by Dick Raymond, published 1993 by Storey Communications, Inc., Pownal, VT.  
*Taylor's Weekend Gardening Guide to Safe and Easy Lawn Care: The Complete Guide to Organic, Low-Maintenance Lawns* by Barbara Ellis, published by Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997.  
*The Chemical-Free Lawn*, by Warren Schultz, published 1993 by Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA; (610) 967-5171.  
*U.C. Guide to Healthy Lawns*, on line at [www.ipm.ucdavis.edu](http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu).

## PESTICIDES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Pesticides are designed to kill or repel undesired pests. However, many will also harm beneficial insects, birds, aquatic life, reptiles, pets, and even humans. Pesticides can potentially cause a wide variety of health effects in humans, and children face relatively higher risks from pesticide exposure than do adults exposed at the same levels. Recent research shows that common household pesticides show up in treated wastewater and wash off lawns and gardens. These pesticides end up contaminating bodies of water, including the Santa Monica Bay. This fact sheet is part of a series of information pieces aimed at educating Santa Monica area residents about less-toxic pest management techniques.

Pest control strategies and methods described in this publication are consistent with integrated pest management (IPM) concepts, and are based on scientific studies and tests in actual home and garden settings. Use suggested products according to label directions and dispose of unwanted or leftover pesticides at a household hazardous waste collection facility or event. No endorsement of specific brand name products is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products that are not mentioned.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

**Bio-Integral Resource Center (BIRC)**  
(510) 524-2567

**Santa Monica Environmental Programs Division**  
458-2255

[www.santa-monica.org/environment](http://www.santa-monica.org/environment)

#### Free Disposal of Hazardous Products

**Santa Monica residents only**  
Household Hazardous Waste Center  
458-2213

**L.A. County residents**  
1-888-CLEAN-LA

**Fire ant infestations**  
1-888-434-7326

**University of California IPM website**  
[www.ipm.ucdavis.edu](http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu)  
<http://anrcatalog.ucdavis.edu>

**L.A. County Department of Agriculture**  
<http://acwm.co.la.ca.us/>

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This fact sheet and the accompanying IPM outreach program was developed by Central Contra Costa Sanitary District with the following contributions:

#### Writing:

Tanya Drlik, Bio-Integral Resource Center  
Michael Baefsky, Baefsky & Associates

#### Design:

Lauren Wohl Design



Choose less-toxic products for your home and garden.