Northern Gardening Tips

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For hardy lawns, mow first, fertilize later

To out-compete weeds, your lawn grass needs nutrients, but fertilizing too early can stimulate foliage growth and deplete root systems of nutrients.

Make your first fertilizer application after you mow the lawn a time or two in spring. This allows roots to get going, rather than encouraging too much top growth. While excessive top growth might sound like a good thing, it will just keep you busy with the lawnmower and won’t encourage the well-established root systems that make for a healthy lawn.

A recommended fertilizer application rate is 3 lbs of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet annually, split into three applications. Since our cool-season grasses normally go dormant in the summer, hold off on the second application until after Labor Day, when the summer heat has passed. Apply the third around Columbus Day, about a month before the ground freezes. Grass roots store nutrients for use in early spring.

Choose a complete fertilizer with a 3-1-2 or 4-1-2 ratio and half of the nitrogen in a slow-release form. Turf researchers suggest increasing the level of potassium in the October application to decrease winter damage and prevent pest damage the next year.

Remember, all the fertilizer in the world does no good unless it’s dissolved in water. For most of Montana, summer water needs amount to between 1 and 1-1/2 inches of water per week, including rainfall, of course (an old tuna can works fine as a watering gauge). Avoid frequent, light waterings, which promote shallow rooting.

The free publication, “Successful Lawns” is available at www.montana.edu/wwwpb/pubs/mt9310.html
For more resources, contact your county or reservation MSU Extension office or visit www.msuextension.org