

March 2010

## **Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens**

by Paul J. Pugliese

### “When to Fertilize Lawns”

March is usually the time of year that local garden centers begin a major advertising campaign to sell fertilizers for lawns. However, depending on the type of lawn grass that you have, it may be too early to start fertilizing. In general, the best time to fertilize a lawn is whenever it is “actively” growing. So, for fescue lawns and other cool-season grasses that don’t go dormant, the ideal time to fertilize is in fall (October) and spring (March). However, for most other lawns, including bermudagrass, zoysia, centipede, and other warm-season grasses that go dormant in winter, fertilizing this early is a waste of time and money. The ideal time to fertilize these warm-season grasses is from late spring through mid-summer (May to August).

Why shouldn’t you fertilize warm-season grasses when they are dormant? First, when grasses are dormant, their roots are not able to absorb or utilize the nutrients that you apply from fertilizers. By the time the grass does begin actively growing, most of the nitrogen that you applied will have been lost from the soil. Also, fertilizing while the grass is dormant actually encourages more winter weeds, because you are fertilizing the weeds instead of the lawn. Without competition from the lawn, these weeds will grow faster and become more prolific as a result of dormant fertilizer applications. Lastly, fertilizing lawns during their transition into dormancy in fall or out of dormancy in spring may encourage lawn growth that is more likely to be injured from winter kill. Bare spots and thinning of the lawn as well as a delay in spring green-up may occur when lawns are “forced” to grow when they should be dormant.

So, what about using those convenient “weed and feed” products that combine a pre-emergent herbicide and fertilizer in one application? Unfortunately, the ideal time to apply a pre-emergent herbicide actually contradicts the ideal time to apply fertilizer for warm-season lawns. These products are really intended for fescue and other cool-season grasses. In North Georgia, the recommended application window is September 1-15 and March 1-20 to maximize the effectiveness of pre-emergent herbicides. The application timing for these products is critical since they must be applied before annual weeds germinate in spring and fall. It’s always better to apply pre-emergents a little earlier rather than too late; and don’t forget to activate them by watering them into the lawn. For bermudagrass and other warm-season grasses, your lawn would be better off if you bought your fertilizer separate from the pre-emergent herbicide and applied each one at their recommended times.

A soil test is always a good starting point before investing in fertilizer or lime. Your County Extension office can test your soil and provide an exact pH and nutrient analysis with recommendations on how much fertilizer and lime to apply, if *any* is needed. Only a pint of soil that is representative of the area you are sampling (mixed from several spots at random) is all that is needed to send to the lab. One sample can represent up to 15 acres if taken properly. You may bring the sample(s) to our office in a zip lock bag anytime Monday-Friday, 8am-noon and 1-5pm. Our Cherokee County office is located in downtown Canton in the historic white marble courthouse. You can also order a soil test kit online and submit by mail at [www.soiltest123.com](http://www.soiltest123.com).

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