

Your 7-Step Organic Lawn Plan

Follow these simple steps for a beautiful, pesticide-free lawn.

Growing a healthy, strong, beautiful organic lawn requires not just a change in fertilizers but also a change in mindset. “With an organic lawn, you’re not simply putting down fertilizers four times a year; you’re initiating cultural practices to nurture life in the soil, and in turn, the soil sustains the grass,” explains Paul Tukey, author of *The Organic Lawn Care Manual* and spokesperson for SafeLawns.org.

Transitioning your lawn to organic takes an initial investment of time, effort, and money, because you will need to restore the lawn’s soil and the health of the grass. But in the long run, you’ll save money and effort as your grass grows healthy and strong and fights off pests and weeds on its own. Whether you’ve managed your lawn organically for years or are just getting started, follow this step-by-step plan to get the best-looking, healthiest lawn you’ve ever had.

1. Test Your Soil

Grass will grow best when the PH is between 6.2 and 6.8. While a complete soil test is recommended, at least be sure that the PH is correct. If the PH is too low (too acid), or too high (too alkaline), the grass roots cannot make efficient use of nutrients in the soil. PH is raised with lime or calcium fertilizers, and it is lowered with elemental Sulphur.

2. Thicken Your Lawn

Spreading grass seed over an existing lawn is the best way to get a lush green swath that’s free of weeds, Tukey says. Where grass is thick and healthy, weed seeds have no place to germinate, and the grass can put down a wider and deeper root system, which can pull nutrients and water from the soil more efficiently. Look for a seed mix specifically labeled for your conditions: sun or partial shade. (Grass doesn’t grow well in full shade, so plant other groundcovers in those areas.) And be sure to get a type of grass suited to your climate.

Fall is the best time to over seed, but if your lawn is thin, don’t be afraid to do it in spring. Before you start, cut your grass to about 2 inches high to allow sunlight to germinate the new seed, recommends Chip Osborne, creator of the Living Lawn, an organic lawn demonstration site in Marblehead, Massachusetts. Spread about 3 to 4 pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet.

3. Feed with Compost

Add compost [3] to increase the soil’s organic matter content to as much as 7 percent and greatly improve water retention at the same time, Osborne says. To apply compost as a topdressing for areas smaller than 2,000 square feet, use a wheelbarrow and drop small piles intermittently around your lawn; then rake the compost out to about a quarter to three-eighths of an inch, recommends Osborne. For larger areas, use a spreader.

4. Water Wisely

In summer, lawns account for 40 to 60 percent of residential water usage, but using organic practices—selecting an appropriate grass species for your area, and applying compost—can mean using a lot less water [4]. Water early in the morning to prevent fungal disease and reduce evaporation loss, Osborne advises. Deep, infrequent irrigation forces grass to send roots down into the soil to find moisture and makes it more drought-tolerant. The amount of water to use varies for each grass variety and soil type, but about an inch every week—from rainfall or your hose—is enough to keep an established lawn green.

5. Cut High

Mowing cool-season grass 3 inches high is just as effective as using herbicides to suppress crabgrass, if not more so, according to research from the University of Maryland. Set your mower blade to its highest level. Just be sure to keep it sharp—dull blades leave ragged edges on the grass blades, which allows rapid evaporation of water and makes the grass more susceptible to infection. Mow often, because you never want to cut off more than one-third of the grass blades at a time.

6. Leave the Clippings

Instead of bagging up grass clippings and sending them to the landfill, invest in a mulching blade for your mower and leave the clippings on your lawn. As they decompose, they add valuable organic matter to the soil and about 25% of your nitrogen needs for the season, which means you have to spend less time and money on fertilizing. Contrary to popular belief, letting the clippings decompose on your lawn does not cause a buildup of thatch (a layer on top of the soil that blocks water and nutrients from reaching the grass's roots). Rather, thatch is caused by over fertilizing.

7. Feed Responsibly

Organic fertilizers come from natural plant, animal, and mineral sources. Once these products are applied to the lawn, soil microorganisms break down the nutrients into a form that plants can take up. Organic fertilizers release nutrients slowly as plants need them, but you still need to follow the directions on the label to avoid overfeeding (yes, you can overdo organic fertilizers, too). In general, apply a low dose in early fall and in mid spring.

These steps are simple, and they demand (over time) less work than conventional lawn care. But isn't any effort worth the peace of mind you get from safeguarding your family and the environment?