

Confessions of a Lazy Gardener

Issue #7: Lawn Care the Lazy Way

*First published in April 2000 Garden Spray
Reprinted April 2022*

Well, the grass will be greening up any time now, and it's time to think about Lawn Care the Lazy Way. Unfortunately, lawn care is really a situation where A Stitch in Time Saves Nine, and An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure. So, good lawn care really goes against the grain for a Lazy Gardener, although doing a few things up front will save plenty of time later. Needless to say, I do not have a perfect lawn. To have a perfect lawn, one cannot be a Lazy Gardener, as far as I can tell.



Here are a few lawn care observations:

1. Preemergent crabgrass control is worth the time and money. Most of us don't really need more than one fertilizer application in the spring, and getting one of those expensive ones with the yellow stuff in it will make a huge difference during the crabgrass season. You might not get 100% prevention, but even 90% is a LOT of crabgrass you don't have to pull out.

Of course, you shouldn't put this down where you plan to plant seed or anything. There is a special version for newly seeded areas, but I've never tried it. As to when to put it on: I usually put it on after I have made Phil mow for the first time in the spring.

2. Seeding in bare or thin spots is not all that hard. I've had good luck with that grass patch stuff that has seed and green-tinted mulch mixed together. Seems like that mulch holds the moisture until the next time I get around to watering. Sometimes my watering practice is not ideal for new grass.

3. Broadleaf weed control is (mostly) possible. For the easy stuff -- dandelions and plantains, an occasional squirt of one of the usual broadleaf weed killers works fine. I usually mix up a small batch in a hand spray bottle and spray the weed directly. I also have a neighbor who has one of those Weed Hound weeders, to which he has become quite attached. Since he has eradicated the dandelions from his own yard, he now has free rein in my yard as well. Despite my half-hearted efforts at chemical control, he still has material to work with in my lawn. I don't believe in those Weed-and-Feed fertilizers. For one thing, I don't like stuff sticking to the grass with kids and pets in the area, and for another thing, the time when I need weed control the most is the worst time to apply fertilizer.



4. Creeping Charlie is in a class by itself. I have heard about people who have gotten rid of it, but I'm not convinced that it is in the realm of possibility for the typical Lazy Gardener. Many experts tell us that the secret to the Creeping Charlie problem is to not get it in the first place -- by having a lush green lawn that doesn't allow it to get established. This advice is less than helpful for those of us who have huge mats of the stuff crawling through the back yard, often endangering neighbor relations by hopping into adjacent properties.

I have not succeeded in eradicating Creeping Charlie, but I have noticed a few things:

- (a) it takes many applications of a broadleaf weedkiller to completely eradicate it, if it is indeed possible. Something with Dicamba (or Trimec) seems to be more effective.
- (b) the experts suggest spraying either when it is growing vigorously (pretty much any time, as far as I can tell) and blossoming; or at the end of the season, after it has been weakened by a hard freeze. Even then it takes multiple applications.
- (c) the 20 Mule Team Borax solution does seem to get rid of a lot of it, but isn't 100% effective. And, you can't reapply it, since boron accumulates in the soil, which is a bad thing.
- (d) If there isn't a lot of it, pulling it out of the lawn might be as effective as anything else. But you need to be ever watchful. Eternal Vigilance is the Price of a Charlie-free Lawn.
- (e) Bob Olson reports success with painting individual leaves of Creeping Charlie with Roundup using an artist's brush. I believe this proves that Bob does not qualify as a Lazy Gardener.

5. You need to mow at least occasionally, if only to stay on good terms with the neighbors. The purists recommend mowing the lawn shorter in the spring and longer in the summer, when it's hot and the longer grass can shade the ground and keep it a little cooler. That would mean taking the time to change the mower height. Lazy Gardeners should just leave the mower height at one position -- probably the "summer" configuration.

Ideally, grass clippings should be left on the lawn to return nitrogen and organic material to the soil. The new mulching mowers seem to do a pretty good job unless the grass gets a little long between mowings. I personally collect my clippings because (a) I want the clippings for mulch in my flower beds, where weed reduction and moisture retention are more important to me than the greenest lawn on the block; and (b) I tend to pick up a lot of clippings on my feet or shoes and track them all over the house. Collecting clippings probably deprives the lawn of some nutrients, so it's possible that I should really fertilize twice in the spring. But I haven't done so thus far.

6. Watering is another important part of lawn care. Or so I've heard. There are two schools of thought on lawn watering: (a) Do it; and (b) Don't do it. Since most northern grasses will just naturally go dormant if it gets dry -- and green up again when it rains again -- some folks don't advocate watering the lawn. They may be right, but there are a few problems: it looks bad; it feels bad underfoot; and sometimes it doesn't recover all the way. So I try to water the lawn when it starts to look a little tired. Being a Lazy Gardener, I of course have never gotten around to getting a sprinkler system, so I move hoses around the yard. They say it's a good idea to water less often but more deeply. Since I often forget to move the sprinkler for many hours (and occasionally leave it running all night), I follow this practice without even trying.

7. Lawns need fertilizing. I try to fertilize once in the spring (with the crabgrass preventer) and twice in the fall: once in early September and once in mid-October. I have never taken the time to figure out the ideal fertilizer nutrient mix, so I just buy something cheap in the fall. The fall applications seem to make a big difference (update: when I remember to do it). Hard to tell about the spring one, since everything's growing quite well whether fertilizer has been applied or not.

8. Trimming and edging are for other people. I have heard of these, but cannot say anything about them from direct experience.

9. Fall cleanup is minimal. From everything I've heard, I guess it's a good idea to rake the leaves off the lawn before it snows. This is not a huge problem for me since all the big trees on our property have died since Phil and I got married and he moved to Dart Avenue. And, I want all the leaves I can find for winter protection of the flower beds, so I rake them off the lawn and onto the borders. If I didn't have flowers, I don't know how much raking I'd really do!

So, there you have it: everything I know about lawn care. It isn't much -- and neither is my lawn!