

COMING UP GREEN

Coax your lawn out of hiding this spring

BY SANDRA GITTLEN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM RETTIG

Spring may be around the corner, but in Worcester County, homeowners will have their work cut out for them. Experts predict that after a harsh summer drought and an early snowfall, grass and soil will need to be coaxed back into shape.

"In 2007, the leaves no sooner finished dropping before we had the fast onset of winter weather, which included low temperatures for an extended period of time. If folks missed their window of opportunity to get their lawns cleaned up, they may see extensive damage this spring," says Mark Forgione, owner of Forgione Lawn Care in Clinton.

According to Forgione, a Northeast Organic Farming Association accredited Organic Land Care Professional, homeowners could encounter numerous problems, including snow mold.

"When leaves cover the ground, they create a thermal blanket conducive for mold to grow and thrive," he says.

To combat snow mold, which can be pink or gray, Forgione says you should clean off the lawn using a steel rake, incorporate seed by tilling or aerating, and balance the soil with enhancers such as compost, conditioners and organic fertilizers.

Michelle Harvey, president of the Massachusetts Nursery and Landscape Association and owner of Lakeview Nurseries in Lunenburg and Winchendon, says homeowners this spring may be facing fallout from last year's dry spell.

"Our lawns tend to get brown toward July and August and then they recover in the fall when we get normal rainfall. That didn't happen last year so we may see excessive dieback on turf areas this spring," she says.

She points to another potential problem: damage from hungry crows and rodents, such as mice and voles, searching for grubs.

"The damage from grubs is minor compared to the damage that animals digging for grubs cause. In conditions like snow cover, animals can tunnel under without you noticing," she says, adding that grub populations, which have been on the rise, are really high in this area.

While many products on the market address grub control, Trey Rogers, a crop and soil sciences professor at Michigan State University and author of "Lawn Geek," warns that they can be misleading.

"The label on these products often says to apply before grubs hatch. Most homeowners don't know that grubs hatch in early August in this region and they'll want to apply the product between July 1 and 21 or else they're probably wasting their money," he says.

While these problems might seem insurmountable to the average homeowner, Harvey says the best way to start to understand how to repair your lawn is to understand the soil beneath it.

She recommends doing a soil test every three years to determine pH levels. "We here in Massachusetts have among the most acidic soils in the country," she says. To test your soil, consult a landscaper or send a sample to the University of Massachusetts' Soil and Plant Tissue Testing Laboratory in Amherst (for more details, visit www.umass.edu/plsoils/soiltest/).

"You can uncover a lot of information such as your soil's nitrogen, phosphorous

and potassium levels," she says.

Dealing with soil is a problem that Lancaster residents Peggy and Norman Diaz know all too well. "When we first moved in 26 years ago, we had several pine trees and large oaks taken down. So we went from an all-shade front yard to a bright, sunny yard and the grass died," Peggy Diaz says.

They tried to fix the problem themselves, putting down bags of lime every year, but had no luck. Eventually they became clients of Forgione Lawn Care. "Mark had our soil tested and then gave us a printout. We now know how the soil has been affected by the pine and oak tree stumps," she says.

Mark Langevin, of Hubbardston, is also familiar with the havoc that pine trees can wreak on soil. "We live in a wooded area so just getting the right sunlight on the lawn is a big battle as well as dealing with the acidity and moss," he says. But the bigger problem he has encountered has more to do with the depth of the soil than the consistency. "When the house was originally built, they skimped on the top soil. There was maybe an inch, but that's not enough to properly grow grass," he says.

Harvey says this is a common problem with new construction. "We would like to see at least 6 inches of soil or organic matter put down with new homes, but most are landscaped with only 2 to 3 inches. So from the very beginning, homeowners are faced with a challenge, because no amount of maintenance is going to overcome that deficiency," she says.

Langevin added another 5 inches of topsoil to his 18,000-square-foot lawn. He then had a professional hydroseed with a mix of seed, water, fertilizer and fiber mulch to hold moisture and speed growth. To ensure proper watering, he added a sprinkler system, which he calls key.

Langevin, who has a well, avoided the all-too-common water shortage issues faced by some homeowners with municipal water.

Diaz is not so lucky. "We're subject to water bans every summer and that was something that upset the previous landscaping companies we worked with. They'd appear, put some chemicals down, and then tell you to water the lawn four times a day for several weeks. We just couldn't. We're all in this water bans together," she says. Forgione worked

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Prep work

Mark Langevin of Hubbardston didn't have enough soil in his yard for lush grass. To improve his lawn, he added another 5 inches of topsoil.



Seeding

Langevin had a professional put down a hydroseed mixture of seed, water, fertilizer and fiber mulch. The hydroseed holds moisture and speeds growth.



Green again

The finished lawn. Langevin says adding a sprinkler system was key.

around the ban by watering early in the morning with a hose and the minimum amount of water.

While Rogers puts watering among his top three necessities for proper lawn care, he says it's less important than proper mowing and fertilization.

"Mowing correctly is most important and the most common thing that homeowners do incorrectly," he says. He recommends mowing every other day and cutting off no more than a third of the leaf blade to promote density. "People go too long between mowing and then scalp the lawn, putting it into psychological shock. Then your turf isn't strong enough to withstand a water ban or insect problem," he says.

He also suggests getting on a holiday schedule when it comes to fertilization.

"A program that would work well is to fertilize on Memorial Day, July 4th, Labor Day, and between Halloween and Thanksgiving. The last one will give your lawn enough nutrients to last through the next Memorial Day," he says.

He applauds the use of organic fertilizers,

a growing movement in lawn care, but says homeowners must pay attention to the balance of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium listed, in that order, on the bag. "You need to consider how much phosphorous is going down because you can end up putting more on your lawn than you ever wanted to," he says. For an established lawn, he recommends buying a 20-3-15 or 25-0-25 fertilizer. For a new lawn, apply a starter fertilizer, which contains more phosphorous, he notes in his book.

He adds that organic fertilizers "simply aren't as potent as synthetic products so their ability to protect is not as great."

Harvey, also a proponent of organic fertilizers, agrees that while they can be effective, "it's difficult to expect the same results as synthetic insect and weed control. You're going to have dandelions, clovers and some whatnot. For some homeowners, that can be disappointing," she says.

But that doesn't deter Peggy Diaz, who is a fan of Forgione's organic approach. "For me, organic is a benefit. I know that it takes more patience, but I'm not looking for a putting green," she says. **W**



Five steps for spring

To get the best results from your lawn, Mark Forgione, owner of Forgione Lawn Care in Clinton, recommends starting with these five basic steps.

- Do a thorough spring cleanup that includes raking and aeration.
- Test your soil and amend your lawn care plan as necessary based on results.
- Reseed with fresh, high-quality seed.
- Top-dress and optimize the soil to promote healthy, deep-root systems. (He recommends using a NOFA-approved compost-type top dressing with an overabundance of nutrients and beneficial living organisms.)
- Fertilize properly by paying attention to the correct formula, amount applied, timing of the application and application procedure.