

**Friday's Feature****By****Theresa Friday**

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**It's too early to fertilize the lawn**

As we move into spring, many gardeners are anxious to jump start their lawns. However, warm season grasses, like centipede, are often slow to wake up from winter dormancy. So, be careful and don't rush out and apply fertilizers too early.

Putting fertilizer on too early in the spring will feed and push pesky winter weeds. If put on heavily, fertilizer will create a lush, soft growth of grass that will be sensitive to brown patch and other diseases. If we do get a late frost, these lawns will be hurt the most; besides, what homeowner can't wait to mow the yard?

Let the grass awaken gradually before applying fertilizer. Allow the grass to show definite activity. Mow new growth once or twice before fertilizing.

Applying fertilizer correctly is important. The health and vigor of your lawn depends upon applying the right amount and type of fertilizer. Too little or too much can cause problems for the growth, appearance, and health of your lawn.

On-going studies at the University of Florida are showing that it is best to use a fertilizer type where the first number (nitrogen) is equal to, or very close to, the last number (potassium).

The middle number, or phosphorus, should be based on the results of a soil test. Phosphorus fertilization is not always required due to past fertilizer applications and the inherent nature of some Florida soils. Excess phosphorus applications can result in reduced water quality. Without a soil test, use a fertilizer with a zero to two percent phosphorus.

Good fertilizer formulations include those such as a 15-0-15 and 18-2-18. Be sure to choose fertilizers where the majority of the nitrogen is of a slow release nature. When fertilizer nutrients are in "slow release" forms, they are available to plants over a longer period of time and fewer nutrients are wasted or lost as pollutants.

To find out what percentage of the total nitrogen in a fertilizer is slow-release, just look on the label for the "Guaranteed Fertilizer Analysis". Beneath the percent total nitrogen, you'll find the percent slow-release nitrogen. Look for terms like timed-release, slow-release, controlled-release, water insoluble nitrogen or polymer, plastic or resin-coated urea.

Be careful applying fertilizers where the nitrogen (first number) is very high or out of proportion to the other numbers. For example, fertilizer formulations of 27-3-4 and 29-7-7 are not good choices for our typical lawn grasses grown on sandy-type soils.

When it is time to fertilize, be sure to use caution when applying fertilizers to prevent pollution. If you spill fertilizer on the driveway or sidewalk, be sure to sweep it up and put it back in the bag. If fertilizer is not swept up, it will easily find its way down the storm drain and into the water supply. If fertilizer is spilled on the lawn, do not irrigate it into the lawn, but be sure to sweep up here as well.

Avoid fertilizing if a heavy rain is forecast. This increases the potential for fertilizers to run off into storm drains or to leach through soil with the rainwater.

To learn more about home lawn fertilization, visit the University of Florida's turfgrass website at <http://yourfloridalawn.ifas.ufl.edu/fertilize.htm>.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension>