

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

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Improve your lawn by using lawn fertilizers with the right numbers

Many people think a beautiful lawn is unattainable, but that is not necessarily true. A good lawn can be achieved if you develop a good understanding of proper fertilization, watering, pest control and mowing.

Larry Williams, Horticulture Extension Agent in Okaloosa County, provides some basic facts relating to fertilizing a Florida lawn.

Many popular lawn fertilizers have too much nitrogen and too little potassium. A common example is 29-3-4. These numbers represent the percent nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K), respectively. A 29-3-4 fertilizer has a lot more nitrogen (29%) than potassium (4%). Despite the fact it's readily available, it's not a good choice for a Florida lawn.

It's better to select a fertilizer where the first and third numbers are equal or close to equal and the center number is very low. A few examples found locally include 15-0-15, 16-2-16 and 18-0-18.

You may be able to produce an attractive lawn for three, four, five years or so using a high nitrogen and low potassium fertilizer such as 29-3-4. But at some point in time, your lawn will begin to decline. This is the misleading part. When the lawn begins to deteriorate, most people blame mole crickets or something else. They never realize the true cause for the decline in their lawn. The excess nitrogen creates a nice green lawn short term (for a few years). But the lawn needs adequate amounts of potassium and other essential plant nutrients, which are not provided by a 29-3-4 or similar analysis fertilizer. As a result, the lawn declines with time.

Of the three primary nutrients (N, P and K), potassium is second only to nitrogen in utilization by lawns. Adequate potassium has been linked to reduced disease problems, improved drought and cold tolerance and enhanced root growth.

Lawn grasses use much less phosphorus (center number) than nitrogen and/or potassium. Because of this and because phosphorus has been implicated as a cause for problems in our surface waters, it's recommended to base phosphorus rates on the results of a reliable soil test. In the absence of a soil test, select a fertilizer with 2% or less phosphorus. For a newly planted lawn, choose something like 8-4-8 or 10-4-10 when a soil test indicates a need for extra phosphorus.

Finally, look for slow release lawn fertilizers. It's best to purchase a lawn fertilizer with at least half the nitrogen in a slow release form. Usually in very small print beneath the guaranteed analysis you can find a statement about the amount of slow release nitrogen. The words water insoluble, slowly available or slowly available soluble nitrogen or coated are types of slow-release nitrogen.

Then, some calculations are necessary. If, for example a 10-10-10 fertilizer says it contains 5% slow-release nitrogen, divide the 5% by the total percent of nitrogen (10% in this example) and multiply by 100 to get the percentage of nitrogen that is in slow-release form. In this example it is $5/10 \times 100 = 50\%$.

Choosing a fertilizer with the right numbers is an important part of maintaining a healthy long lasting Florida lawn. For additional information on this topic, contact your local UF/IFAS Extension Office or visit <http://yourfloridalawn.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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.

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