

Description

Proper landscape maintenance, including maintenance of vegetated stormwater BMPs, is important to reduce nutrient and chemical loading to the storm drain system, reduce nuisance flows and standing water in stormwater BMPs, and maintain healthy vegetation that helps minimize erosion. Additionally, when landscapes and vegetated BMPs are over-irrigated, the ground remains saturated and capacity to infiltrate runoff is reduced.



Photograph LM-1. Over-irrigation and overspray can wash fertilizers and lawn chemicals into the storm drain system. These flows can come together with storm runoff and cause nuisance flow conditions in stormwater BMPs. Photo courtesy of the City of Westminster.

Appropriate Uses

Appropriate lawn care practices are applicable to residential, commercial, municipal, and some industrial operations.

Practice Guidelines¹

Practice guidelines for a healthy lawn that reduces pollution during both wet and dry weather conditions include a combination of practices such as mowing, aeration, fertilization, and irrigation. Also, see the Pesticide, Herbicide, and Fertilizer Usage BMP for information on proper use of these chemicals and Integrated Pest Management (IPM) strategies.

Lawn Mowing and Grass Clipping Waste Disposal

- Keep lawn clippings and debris out of gutters. When blowing walkways or mowing lawns, direct equipment so that the clippings blow back onto the lawn rather than into the street, or collect clippings blown onto the street and properly dispose of them.
- Mulch-mowing turfgrass at a height of 2.5 to 3 inches helps turfgrass develop deeper root systems. No more than one-third of the grass blade should be removed in a single mowing. Mulched grass clippings can return roughly 25 to 30% of the needed nitrogen that grass requires to be healthy, thereby reducing fertilizer requirements. Avoid throwing grass clippings onto streets and sidewalks to reduce nutrient pollution to surface waterbodies.
- Minimize thatch development by mowing at appropriate frequencies and heights for the grass type, avoiding overwatering, preventing over fertilization, and aerating the turf.

¹ These practice guidelines have been adapted from the *GreenCO Best Management Practices for the Conservation and Protection of Water Quality in Colorado: Moving Toward Sustainability* (GreenCO and WWE 2008). See this manual for additional detail and references.

Lawn Aeration

- Aerate turf once or twice per year, as needed, in the early spring and/or late fall to aid in capturing the natural precipitation during non-weed germination periods and prior to adding organic materials and fertilizers. Aeration reduces soil compaction and helps control thatch in lawns while helping water and fertilizer move into the root zone.
- A lawn can be aerated at any time the ground is not frozen, but should not be done when it is extremely hot and dry. Heavy traffic areas will require aeration more frequently.
- Do not use spike-type aerators, which compact the soil. Holes should be two to three inches deep and no more than two to four inches apart. Lawns should be thoroughly watered the day before aerating so plugs can be pulled more deeply and easily. Mark all sprinkler heads, shallow irrigation lines, and buried cable TV lines before aerating so those lines will not be damaged.

Fertilizer Application

- Apply fertilizer when needed to achieve a clearly defined objective such as increasing shoot growth, root growth, flowering or fruiting; enhancing foliage color, and plant appearance; or correcting or preventing nutrient deficiencies.
- Because manufactured fertilizers can be relatively high in nutrient content, it is critical to follow the manufacturer's directions, using the minimum amount recommended. Over-application "burns" leaves and may lead to water pollution, thatch buildup, excessive mowing, and weed growth.
- Only apply nutrients the plants can use. Fertilizer labels identify product contents in terms of ratios that indicate percentage of ingredients by product weight.

Phosphorus

Phosphorus is commonly overused and application should be based on soil tests. Phosphorus washing into surface waterbodies leads to excessive algae growth.

Phosphorous does not move out of the soil like nitrogen, so constant additions are unnecessary.

Soil Testing

There are several qualified laboratories in Colorado that provide soils tests to determine recommendations for fertilizer type and application rates. There are also commercially available quick test kits that are less accurate but could be used by a homeowner. Without an analysis, a homeowner may be buying unnecessary fertilizer or applying too much. A \$20 to \$40 soil analysis has potential to save an owner much more.

The CSU Extension program offers a soil testing service. Contact the CSU Extension for your county or visit <http://www.ext.colostate.edu> for more information including a list of laboratories.

- When practical and appropriate, base fertilizer application on soil analysis. Be aware that at many new development sites, soil conditions following grading often no longer consist of topsoil. "Basement" soils with poor texture and low nutrient content may be present. As a result, soil amendment is often needed to improve the physical properties (tilth) of the soil to provide a better environment for plant roots to improve nutrient uptake. Soil analysis can help to identify soil amendments that improve both the physical and nutrient characteristics of the soil, as well as identify fertilization requirements.
- Utilize split applications of slow-release (controlled-release) fertilizer forms such as IBDU, sulfur-coated urea and natural organic-based fertilizers (not to be confused with raw manure) to minimize the risk of nutrients leaching into groundwater or running off in surface water. When properly applied, other forms of fertilizer can also be safely used, provided that over-watering and over-fertilization do not occur.
- When applying fertilizer, broadcast it uniformly over the targeted area of the landscape. Keep fertilizer off streets, sidewalks, and driveways to prevent water pollution. Fertilizer that inadvertently falls on impervious surfaces should be swept back onto the lawn.
- Recommendations for fertilizer application vary among industry professionals. CSU Extension's fertilizer recommendations for established Colorado lawns are provided in the table below. Site-specific conditions should also be considered when determining the need for fertilizer.

Table LM-1. CSU Extension Recommendations for Nitrogen Application Rate

Turfgrass Species	Nitrogen Application Rate in Pounds/1,000 sq. ft.				
	Mid-March to April ^{A,B}	May to Mid-June ^B	July to Early August ^B	Mid-August to Mid-September ^{B,C}	Early October to Early November ^{B,D}
High Maintenance Bluegrass Ryegrass	0.5-1	1	Not Required	1	1-2 (optional)
Low Maintenance Bluegrass	0.5	0.5-1	Not Required	1	1 (optional)
Tall Fescue	0.5	0.5-1	Not Required	1	1 (optional)
Fine Fescue	0.5	0.5-1	Not Required	0.5-1	None
Buffalo grass, Blue Grama, Bermuda grass	None	0.5-1	0.5-1	None	None

Notes:

^A The March-April nitrogen application may not be needed if prior fall fertilization was completed. If spring green-up and growth is satisfactory, delay fertilizing to May or June.

^B Application rates may be reduced by 1/4 to 1/3 when grass clippings are left on the lawn.

^C On very sandy soils do not fertilize turf after late September to prevent nitrogen from leaching into groundwater during the winter months.

^D Apply when the grass is still green and at least 2-3 weeks prior to the ground freezing. Optional nitrogen applications are indicated for use where higher quality or heavily-used turf is present.

Source: T. Koski and V. Skinner, CSU Extension, 2003.

- If possible, properly irrigate turf following fertilization to help grass utilize applied nutrients and to minimize the potential for fertilizer burn. Care should be taken to avoid excessive irrigation that would result in fertilizer being washed away. Similarly, avoid application of fertilizer immediately prior to heavy rainfall.
- Fall is the best time of year to fertilize bluegrass lawns. Over-application of nitrogen fertilizer in April may cause grass to grow too fast before roots can support the growth, resulting in less heat tolerance.
- Generally, the Colorado Nursery and Greenhouse Association recommends waiting until the second growing season to fertilize ornamental (woody) plants. Commercial fertilizer should not be used in the backfill where it comes in direct contact with the roots.
- Maintain a buffer zone around wells or surface waterbodies where fertilizers are not applied to minimize pollution. Consult the fertilizer product label and local regulations and landscape ordinances for appropriate distances. Research in this area is limited; however, CSU Extension recommends a buffer of 6 to 10 feet for mowed turf areas.
- In areas with sandy soils, it is particularly important to avoid over-application of fertilizer that could leach into groundwater. These areas may be particularly well suited to slow-release fertilizer forms and conservative application rates.

Lawn Irrigation

- The approximate amount of water that needs to be applied **each week** for an average, traditional lawn to supplement normal rainfall is listed in Table 2. (Water utilities may provide additional guidance in terms of suggested run-times for various sprinkler types; <http://www.denverwater.org/Conservation/>.)

Table LM-2. General Guideline for Approximate Supplemental Water for an Average Traditional Lawn (inches per week)

Condition ³	April ¹	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct ²
Non-Drought Conditions	1/4"	1"	1½"	1½"	1¼"	1"	1/2"
During Drought Restrictions (approx. 20% reduction)	1/4"	3/4"	1¼"	1¼"	1"	3/4"	1/2"

¹ For established lawns, water may not be required during April. Base decision on weather conditions.

² For established lawns, water is typically not required after Oct 15.

³ Under less-than-average rainfall conditions, the amounts shown in the chart should be increased. If there is greater-than-normal rainfall, then the amount of supplemental water should be reduced.

- Consult with the CSU Extension Turfgrass program for recommendations for irrigating turfgrasses with lower water requirements (e.g. blue grama, buffalo grass). For native grasses, irrigation may be unnecessary or limited to certain conditions.
- Irrigate the lawn uniformly until the soil is moist to a depth of 4 to 6 inches to encourage deep roots. Frequent, light sprinklings moisten only the surface and may cause shallow-rooted turf and increase weed seed germination. Properly maintain the irrigation system to ensure that the irrigation is being applied at appropriate rates and to the turfgrass, not the sidewalk.

- Maintain irrigation systems in good operating condition with uniform distribution of water. "Smart" irrigation controllers and weather sensors can reduce water waste by shutting off irrigation during storm events and helping owners water according to the needs of the plants to replace water lost to evapotranspiration (ET).
- Proper irrigation can minimize the amount of fertilizer and other chemicals that are leached below the root zone of the grass or washed away by runoff.