Friday’s Feature
By
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Don’t be in a hurry to fertilize your lawn

Cold weather and winter storm warnings have dominated weather patterns in northwest Florida in early February. However, it won’t be too long before warmer weather arrives.

Even though it is still winter, now is the time of year that local garden centers begin major advertising campaigns to sell lawn fertilizers. It is too early to fertilize your lawn.

Fertilize when the lawn is actively growing

Warm-season lawns, including St. Augustinegrass, zoysiagrass, and centipedegrass go dormant in winter in Northwest Florida. Fertilizing now would be a waste of time and money.

Why shouldn’t you fertilize warm-season grasses when they are dormant? First, when grasses are dormant, their roots are not able to absorb or use the nutrients from fertilizers. By the time the grass does begin actively growing, most of the nitrogen you applied will have been lost from the soil. A safe time to apply your first lawn fertilizer is around April 15th.

Don’t feed the weeds

Fertilizing while the grass is dormant actually encourages more winter weeds, because you are fertilizing the weeds instead of the lawn. Without competition from the lawn, these weeds will grow faster and become more prolific as a result of dormant fertilizer applications.

Lastly, fertilizing lawns during their transition into dormancy in the fall or out of dormancy in the spring may encourage lawn growth that is more likely to be injured from winter kill. Bare spots and thinning of the lawn as well as delay in spring green-up may occur when lawns are forced to grow when they should be dormant.

Combo products not the answer

Many of the products available are convenient “weed and feed” products that combine a preemergent herbicide and fertilizer in one application. Unfortunately, the ideal time to apply a preemergent herbicide is very different than the ideal time to apply fertilizer for warm-season lawns.
In northwest Florida, the recommended application window to maximize the effectiveness of preemergent herbicides is typically between February 15 and March 5.

The application timing for these products is critical since they must be applied before summer annual weeds germinate in spring. It’s always better to apply preemergent herbicides a little earlier rather than too late. And don’t forget to activate them by watering them into the lawn.

For St. Augustinegrass, centipedegrass, and other warm-season grasses, buy fertilizer that is separate from the preemergent herbicide. Apply each at their recommended times.

Finding a separate preemergent herbicide, not in weed-n-feed form, may be difficult. Some ones to look for include: benefin (Sta-green Crabgrass Preventer, Hi-Yield Crabgrass Preventer), pendimethalin (Pre-M, Pendulum, Turf Weedgrass Control, Halts Crabgrass Preventer), and bensulide (Green Light Betasan Crabgrass Preventer).

**Start with a soil test**
A soil test is always a good starting point before investing in fertilizer or lime. Your local University of Florida County Extension office can help you get started.

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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