

Organic Lawn Care



The lawn is the most prominent landscape in residential areas across Canada. Many homeowners spend hundreds of dollars a year on related services and products including fertilizers, water, equipment and fuel. This is hard on the wallet, and the environment. Fortunately, an attractive lawn can be maintained without chemicals and with minimal water and fuel. Follow the steps below to create a beautiful, healthy lawn that is safe for all living things.

Feed the soil

The guiding principle of organic lawn care is to nourish the soil.

- Apply compost, either store-bought or homemade, throughout the growing season. This product adds macro and micro-nutrients to the soil, and increases microbial activity that will decompose thatch—a layer of dead and living stems and roots that forms between grass plants and soil.
- Apply organic fertilizers in late summer or early fall to further improve soil fertility and increase its organic matter content. These slow-release products will not burn grass, nor will they contaminate ground and surface water.
- Leave clippings where they fall. They are the perfect fertilizer—free, convenient and full of nutrients. They boost soil fertility by up to 30 per cent and provide soil with much needed moisture and shade. Many municipalities no longer collect clippings, leaving residents with no choice but to recycle them.

Top-quality mulching mowers are best for recycling clippings. Other mowers can be altered to do the job. Remove the bag and seal off the discharge chute so clippings fall under the mower, or use a conversion kit. If your mower drops clippings in clumps, spread them out with a rake.

Aerate

Remove small plugs of earth from the top soil layer to relieve compaction, allowing more water and air to infiltrate. Hire a professional lawn care company to aerate your lawn, or rent an aerator from the local hardware store and do it yourself. This is best done in the fall just before an application of compost or organic fertilizer.

Earthworms aerate and fertilize lawns for free. Attract and protect earthworms in the soil by spreading compost and forgoing chemicals.

Overseed

Overseed every year, ideally in the fall. Dense turf will crowd out weeds like dandelions and crabgrass. Avoid Kentucky blue grass, which needs lots of water and fertilizer and is highly susceptible to grubs. Choose hardy, pest-resistant, drought-tolerant (labelled as endophytic or endopyte-enhanced) perennial rye and fescue grass blends suited to your yard's light, moisture and soil conditions.

Mow high with a sharp blade

Mowing high is good for your lawn. A cutting height of 7.5 centimetres will shade-out sun-loving weeds, encourage grass root development, and keep soil cool and moist. Keep your mower blade sharp to ensure a clean cut and a healthy lawn.

Water wisely

Your lawn needs 2.5 centimetres of water a week. Rain often provides this amount or more. When this is not the case, water deeply once a week during early morning or early evening. Avoid watering at night as cooler temperatures and sitting water invite disease.

Please adhere to municipal water restrictions. Lawns maintained in an organic fashion can survive without water for a long time. During the summer they will go dormant and fade in colour until cooler, wetter weather prevails.

Specific lawn pests and organic solutions

Complete removal of weeds and pests is not possible or necessary. Focus on the overall health of your lawn, accepting that a certain amount of weeds and pest activity is normal.

The first step to pest control is identification. Consult a field guide, knowledgeable neighbour, or lawn care expert to help identify specific pests and develop a plan to control them. The chart below offers tips for dealing with common lawn pests.

	PESTS	ORGANIC CONTROL
PLANTS	Dandelion	Remove by hand, root and all, before they go to seed. Aerate and apply lime; overseed and mow high.
	Broadleaf Plantain	Remove by hand, root and all, and overseed. Aerate and apply compost; mow high.
	Creeping Charlie/Jenny or Ground Ivy	Aerate; add compost; avoid overwatering; allow soil to dry between watering.
	Common Chickweed	Remove plants before flowering and rake up stems to avoid re-establishment; re-seed with tall fescue and mow high; do not overfertilize.
	Crabgrass	Dig out plants completely and re-seed immediately; mow high.
	Annual Bluegrass	Pull, hoe or till small bunches; cover large patches with clear plastic for two weeks and then re-seed; aerate and apply compost; do not overfertilize.
INSECTS	Chinch Bug	Rake to remove any thatch; aerate and apply insecticidal soap every 10–14 days; avoid chemical nitrogen products.
	Beetle Grubs	Apply beneficial nematodes; mow high; water deeply; overseed with ryegrass and fescues.
FUNGI	Brown Patch	Rake to remove any thatch; aerate; forgo chemical fertilizers; overseed with endophytic ryegrasses; do not water at night; mow high, with a sharp blade.
	Dollar Spot	Avoid overwatering and watering at night; dethatch; mow high, with a sharp blade; check for nitrogen imbalance and correct with organic fertilizer.

Additional resources

- [How to Get Your Lawn and Garden off Drugs](#) by Carole Rubin, 2003
- [Insect, Disease and Weed ID Guide](#) by Rodale Press, 2001
- [The Chemical-free Lawn](#) by Warren Schultz, 1989
- [The Organic Lawn Care Manual](#) by Paul Tukey, 2007

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