

## Don't Fertilize the Lawn Too Early



*Photo: Wait until your lawn has turned completely green before fertilizing it. Photo by David Marshall.*

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**I**t's that time of year when many of you are chomping at the bit to fertilize your lawn. So, I want to pass on some information I just read from my fellow Extension Agent, Dan Mullins, over in Santa Rosa County . I agree completely with what Dan has to say, and even added a few extra precautions.

“When I’m not at work, I do my best to stay out of the role of teaching horticulture and gardening and just concentrate on enjoying gardening myself,” says Mullins. “However, sometimes during normal off-duty activities, I see things that concern me.”

“So it was one weekend in February,” continues Mullins. “While visiting a local garden center, I saw people loading up on lawn fertilizer, while some were buying a fertilizer that also contained a weed-killer. I thought ‘surely not yet’, in hopes that these gardeners were only stocking up for spring. It was a beautiful day, so that afternoon I found myself driving through two residential areas. Unfortunately, some homeowners were seen applying lawn fertilizer.”

The third week of February, and even early March, is usually too early for fertilizing lawns in north Florida . The permanent lawn grasses such as centipede, St. Augustine , zoysia, and bermuda are still pretty much dormant. While in this stage, there is little photosynthesis taking place and the grass cannot use the fertilizer. We have to get to a period where we have three or four nights in a row in the mid 60’s before the soil will be warm enough to really kick the grass into consistent growth. That will more than likely not be until April.

There is also a good chance that fertilizing too early can indirectly damage the lawn. Making nitrogen available too early can cause the grass to green up prematurely with the first warm spell, only to be killed by a spring freeze. Fertilizing too early also often causes extreme yellowing on centipede grass because the roots are not adequately developed to pick up the iron that the flush of top growth, stimulated by the fertilizer, demands.

Excessively early fertilizer applications are not environmentally sound either. The soluble elements in most lawn fertilizers, such as nitrogen and potassium, are subject to leaching if not used by the grass. Little can be used by lawn grass in February or early March because of inactivity of the grass.

Soils remain cold at this time of year and the roots of the warm season grasses and other plants are functioning very little. Mullins said that in mid-February in Santa Rosa County, he found the soil temperature to be slightly below fifty-four degrees Fahrenheit at a depth of four inches. As he said, "Only the winter weeds in the lawn can make use of this early fertilizer application, and they will really appreciate it!"

Instead of trying to jump-start spring, let your lawn tell you when to fertilize. Wait until the lawn has totally greened up and has put on a little top growth (grass, not weeds) before you fertilize. This is the first time of the year that the grass can take up and use the fertilizer. This may not be until April.

Preemergent lawn herbicides (weed-killers) are sold alone and in combination with fertilizer. These products can help to prevent spring weeds but only work well when applied at the right time also. So, if you use a weed-and-feed fertilizer, the ideal application time may best be determined by the best time to control the weeds.

In order to work best, a preemergent weed control product must be applied just prior to the time that spring weeds are expected to begin germinating. Under good conditions, they can then provide up to eight weeks of control. If applied too early, part of the effectiveness is lost, and if applied too late, there might be a lack of control because the weeds are too mature.

The best time to apply a preemergent product in the spring can vary by a few weeks, depending upon temperature. When planning to prevent crabgrass and other typical warm-season weeds, Mullins recommends watching the dogwoods and azaleas. When these two plant species bloom, crabgrass is just beginning to germinate and it is the ideal time to put down your preemergent herbicide. Generally, this is in early March. But, weather will vary from year to year, so using the bloom period of azaleas and dogwoods as an indicator can help.

Mullins cautions, though, "Use dogwoods and azaleas as indicator plants only. Do not use preemergent herbicides within the root zone of these plants, as some can cause serious damage." Always follow all the directions and precautions on the label of the herbicide product.

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