Spring Lawn Care Tips
By Pamm Cooper, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

This spring has been colder than normal and it is tempting to want to fertilize as soon as lawns start to appear green. It is best to wait to fertilize until the lawn has been mowed a couple of times as grass plants use stored food they manufactured the previous fall. As these food reserves are used up, especially after grass has been cut a few times, fertilizing can be done. If an organic fertilizer is used, wait for the soil surface temperatures to consistently remain above 50º, as the microbes in the soil that break down the fertilizer are more active as the soil warms up. If fast-release fertilizers are used, make sure to water them in right away. Most of the nitrogen should be used up by the time soil heats up and grass slows or stops growth.

If areas of the lawn are thin and seeding is needed, grasses we use for lawns in New England are cool season grasses whose seeds germinate best at soil temperatures of 50º F or higher. If crabgrass has been a problem where spring seeding will be done, there are two pre-emergent herbicides available for homeowners that will prevent crabgrass germination while allowing the desirable grass seed to germinate and develop. These herbicides are Tupersan™, with the active ingredient siduron, and Tenacity™, with the active ingredient mesotrione.

Spring seeding can have mixed results. Grasses need time to establish a good root system and hot weather usually arrives before this can happen. If hot, dry conditions occur, newly seeded areas may need deep watering once a week. If supplemental irrigation is not used, new grass will normally go dormant or may die as the roots will not be deep in the soil. Daily watering is ill-advised, as this will serve to keep roots up where the moisture is instead of going deeper. The deeper the roots, the better it is for grasses to survive the heat or drought of summer.
Pre-emergent crabgrass control can be used in chronic problem areas. Note that some products will prevent not only crabgrass germination, but also desirable seed germination as well, sometimes lasting on the soil surface for several months. The ideal time to apply a pre-emergent crabgrass control product is normally between forsythia full bloom and lilac/flowering dogwood bloom. Since it has been cold, crabgrass has been late to germinate. After crabgrass has germinated it is too late for most pre-emergent herbicides that have no post-emergent control to be effective. There are post-emergent herbicides that can be applied when crabgrass plants are small.

Mowing properly can help the lawn survive the summer as grass will get a dense habit and reduce incidences of new weeds. Most lawn grasses should be mowed from 2 ½ to 3 ½ inches. Mow a little higher just before hot weather arrives. This will help grass during the summer during heat and drought conditions. Do not mow if hot weather or drought conditions are expected and no supplemental watering will be done.

Grub control in spring can be hard to achieve. The grubs that return to the root zone are different physiologically than they were last fall. They are larger and getting ready to pupate. Most rescue products are not highly effective in the spring. The best way to control grubs that are in the same areas of lawn year after year is to apply a preventative product containing chlorantraniliprole between late April and May 15. An appropriate biological control product can also be used, including Hb nematodes and Bt var. Galleriae. These products are applied when grubs are known to be present, and all products should be watered in as soon as possible to the root zone of the grass. The Bt var. Galleriae should be applied when grubs are small, so spring applications will not be effective.

The spectacular dandelion crop that was widespread this spring could have effects down the road if lawns were then thin and seeds of this plant floated in. Any weed can take advantage of the slightest opening of bare soil, so be vigilant and put grass seed where soil is exposed. Keeping grass dense and mowed higher goes a long way to reduce weed incidences and help increase drought and heat resistance. Do not fertilize during the heat of summer and keep an eye out for potential grub damage in late summer. For more lawn care or gardening tips visit our fact sheet website: https://homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu/factsheets/.

For questions about lawn care or if you have any other gardening questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.