Soil Sense

Good soil grows healthy grass. Try squeezing your soil; desirable loamy soil that is abundant in organic matter and minerals stays together, but falls apart easily upon poking. Sticky clay and loose sandy soils are less friendly to grass, suffering aeration and moisture or drainage problems. Spreading compost will help clay or sandy soils become more hospitable. If you have weed or disease problems, learn your soil's chemistry. Grass requires a slightly acidic soil (pH 6.5-7.0) to absorb nutrients. Most garden supply stores offer home-testing pH kits. If your soil is too acidic, sweeten it with limestone following guidelines available at nurseries or extension offices. If your soil is too alkaline, sour it with sulfur. For a more complete, reliable analysis use a private lab (GMS Labs at 877-315-6007 sells $13 kits or at Casey's Garden Shop in Normal; Sparks Soil Testing 217-735-4233) or the cooperative extension office. These test for pH, phosphorus and potassium, supplying specific recommendations to correct imbalances (request organic rather than synthetic solutions).

Kid-Safe Weeding

What is a weed? As society's perception changes, a flower today may be seen as a weed tomorrow, like clovers or dandelions. Weed-free lawns are unnatural and impossible to achieve without the use of harmful chemicals. Instead, determine how many weeds you'll tolerate and learn to live with them. If your lawn is up to 25% weeds, experts recommend action. Weeds thrive in conditions inhospitable to grass: heavy use, soil compaction, improper fertilization, drought, and short mowing. In order to see a difference, focus on these issues first.

In the mean time, grab some hand tools and pull, cut, dig or mow the intruders. Remove as many as you can (including the root) before the weeds flower and set seed. If you cannot muster the strength to hand weed, utilize squirt spray only on individual plants, sparing the rest of the lawn. Follow label instructions and keep kids, pets, neighbors and everyone else off.
See our Brochure on Organic Yard Products for more information.

Pests

Most insects don't damage grass—many are helpful! If you have an insect problem, try addressing mowing, fertilizing, watering, and thatch issues. With a little patient, this method works most of the time. If you need more help, don't reach for the poisons. The Master Gardeners of Cooperative Extension recommend using Integrated Pest Management (IPM)...

1. Identify the pest—local cooperative extension offers insect and plant disease identification (309-663-8306)
2. Determine the damage
3. Implement organic treatments—mechanical trapping devices, natural predators, insect growth regulators (pheromones), mating disruption and natural chemical pesticides, borax, soap
4. Use synthetic pesticides only as a last resort, starting with the least toxic. Chemical labeling advises on acute toxicity: Warning is least poisonous, Caution more poisonous, and Danger, most poisonous.

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Common Sense Lawn Care

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Yard Smart Common Sense Lawn Care

Good Grass

Choose low maintenance grass types that are suited to local conditions, resistant to pests, weeds, disease and drought. Kentucky bluegrass is ideal in the humid Illinois climate, but cool-season varieties once native to prairies and pastures are popular, including chewing fescues, tall fescues, and improved perennial ryegrasses. Every variety has numerous strains and hybrids, each with specific attributes (e.g., shade tolerance, disease resistance, weed control). The best grasses for you depend on many factors, including how you use the yard. Consult organic lawn care books, local experts or successful ecologically-minded homeowners with similar lawn conditions.

Minimize Thatch

Thatch is a buildup of stems, roots, and matted grass clippings. When less than ½" deep, thatch acts as a mulch, offering insulation, soil cooling, and moisture preservation. Too thick of thatch keeps out water, air, and fertilizer, harboring insects and promoting disease. While over-watering, compaction, and improper mowing contribute to thick thatch, chemical use is the main culprit.

Earthworms and microorganisms decompose thatch rapidly in healthy lawns, releasing nutrients into the soil. Chemical dousing makes soil inhospitable to these essential organisms. Aerating the soil and using a thatch rake can loosen the soil and assist in thatch decomposition. Earthworms are the prize thatch-busters, and lawns with a good supply often have no thatch issues.

The Art of Mowing

Grass does not want to be mowed. It prefers to grow tall (maximizing the blade's food-producing photosynthesis), to mature and set seeds. Cornell University turf grass expert Norman Hummel says mowing is a violent, physical removal of living tissue that shocks the plant by suddenly amputating its food source. Additionally, chopping the blade encourages side shoots and creates ports of entry for disease. Skillful mowing creates a compromise between your needs and your grass'. Mow high and often to minimize plant trauma, while encouraging deep roots. Kentucky bluegrass, tall fescues, and ryegrass should be cut to 3" (bentgrass and Bermuda grass can tolerate shorter cuts). Taller grass also helps shade out weeds, prevents soil from drying out, and encourages deeper roots.

Cut no more than 1/3 of the blade at a time to minimize tissue damage. Short clippings return nitrogen to the soil, but exceptionally long clippings can choke the lawn with thick thatch. Time mowing by grass length, mow less often in hot, dry weather, and cut your grass with a sharp blade to minimize damage.

See the EAC's Mowing brochure for more information

Minimal Watering

Grass plants don't like to work harder than they have to. If water is readily available on the soil surface from daily watering or heavy rains, the roots won't penetrate into the subsoil for moisture. Pampered grass with shallow roots will suffer in a dry spell. Grasses handle the heat and dryness of summer by going semi-dormant—overwatering does more harm. Only water grass when it begins to wilt from dryness (when color fades and footprints stay compressed). Then, thoroughly drench the lawn, soaking 1" of water the full depth of the roots, perhaps 6-8" deep. Never let the flow rate of the sprinkler exceed the infiltration rate of your soil. Water after the dew has dried in the morning to prevent disease, but before the heat of the day to avoid evaporation.

Natural Fertilizing

Don't make your lawn dependent on chemical fertilizers. Eliot Roberts, director of the Lawn Institute, says that heavy chemical fertilizer will grow grass to death. Rapid growth makes grass susceptible to disease, while synthetic fertilizer acidifies and salts the soil. Natural fertilizers help maintain a neutral pH, slower growth, deeper roots, more realistic greening, and help earthworms and soil bacteria thrive, making more nutrients available to grass. They also protect your water supplies from carcinogenic nitrogen by -products.

Light grass clippings offer free fertilizer. Within two weeks, nitrogen from clippings emerges in new grass. Supplemental organic fertilizers include dehydrated cow manure, dried poultry manure, fish emulsion, blood meal, or cottonseed meal. Add clover and other nitrogen-fixing plants to your lawn seed mix for self-fertilizing.