KPOV – *The Point*

Gardening: Get Good at It

“Dethatch and Aerate your Lawn”

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Spring has sprung and the grass has rizzz. So now what? Does the grass under your feet feel spongy or do you have high traffic areas that have gotten packed down? Does it seem that water runs off more than soaking in? How about that dry patch?

Turfgrass roots need an adequate supply of oxygen for normal growth and development. Severely compacted soils have limited supplies of oxygen and will not support good root growth even when favorable temperatures and moisture levels are present. Compacted soils will compromise root development and turf density, inhibit infiltration, and increase surface runoff.

Another problem could be too much thatch. Thatch is a loose, intermingled organic layer of dead and living shoots, stems, and roots that develops between the zone of green vegetation and the soil surface. It is mostly undecomposed at the top and in a stage of more advanced decomposition where it meets the soil. In Central Oregon soils have very little organic material and few microorganisms, resulting in thatch layers building up quickly. A little thatch is desirable, since it helps moderate temperature extremes at the soil surface and provides a cushion effect on the surface but too much thatch can present some negative consequences. To determine if your lawn has a thatch problem, remove a small, plug of turf several inches deep. Note the spongy layer of material between the turf and soil. If this layer is more than ½ inch thick you should consider having your lawn dethatched. You can rent a dethatcher or hire a professional. Be sure to wipe down the blades with rubbing alcohol to prevent the spread of disease. Then set the blades about a quarter-inch above a sidewalk or driveway. Avoid having the blades hit the ground; if the blades are set too low then they may cause too much damage to the turf. You want them set just low enough to pull out all dead debris. It is best to get into a routine of dethatching every other year as the lawn greens up, which is usually April through mid-May here in Central Oregon.

If you have never dethatched your lawn before, you may be shocked at how much thatch pulls up. Don’t panic, the lawn will look rough for a few weeks then recover nicely. The benefit to dethatching is that it allows new lush grass shoots to fill in thick and full. It also makes it much easier for water to flow through the soil to the root system. This means a more water-efficient lawn.

Follow your dethatching routine with an application of fertilizer.

Aerating a lawn is usually recommended when the soil becomes compacted and water and nutrients can’t get to the root. Lawn aeration equipment will pull “cores or plugs of soil out of the ground, letting air in. These plugs should be 2-3″ in depth and about3” apart. One of the most frequently made mistakes is the lack of sufficient cores or plugs removed from the lawn. Two passes may be required to ensure that air, water and nutrients can get down to the roots. Take care to mark all sprinkler heads so that they can be avoided with the aerator. This will save on costly repairs to the irrigation system.

Before you aerate, test the moisture level of the soil with a trowel. The work will be far easier when the soil is moderately moist. If the soil sticks to the trowel as you remove it, the soil is too wet for aeration. Allow the plugs that have been pulled to remain on the lawn. They will gradually decompose and return their nutrients to the soil. To speed this process, mow with a low-cutting blade once the plugs are dry. Make two passes, going in opposite directions, to ensure even break-up and spreading of the plugs.

After mowing, water the lawn to help further dissolve the plugs. Your lawn will look better and feel smoother underfoot. Returning clippings to the turf will not produce thatch the return of clippings to the lawn increases the biological activity at the soil surface, thereby helping to minimize an accumulation of thatch.

For more information about this and other gardening topics log on to gocomga.com and click on KPOV Radio. This has been Gardening: Get Good at It on the Point, KPOV High Desert Community Radio.

Resources:

<https://extension.oregonstate.edu/gardening/techniques/central-oregon-climate-how-it-relates-gardening>

<https://extension.illinois.edu/hortihints/0402c.html>

<http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/smart_vegetable_gardening_with_season_extenders>

<https://ag.umass.edu/sites/ag.umass.edu/files/fact-sheets/pdf/season_extenders.pdf>

<https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/ec1627/html>

<https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/sites/catalog/files/project/pdf/pnw548.pdf>