

Lawn renewal and renovation tips to create a perfect lawn this season

Written by Melinda Myers

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The extreme heat and drought of 2012 was hard on lawns and gardens. "Many gardeners are facing a blank slate of bare soil, masses of dead patches that were once lawn or a bit of grass interspersed in a sea of weeds," says gardening expert Melinda Myers.

Myers recommends following these steps to improve lawns this season.

Start this spring to renovate or improve your weather-worn lawn. Remember that water is critical to get newly seeded and sodded lawns to survive. So be prepared to help nature along with the recovery effort.

Evaluate the damage. Then use the check list below to find the best course of action to aid the ailing lawn.

If the lawn is more than 60 percent weeds or bare soil, it's probably time to start over. Use this opportunity to create a great foundation for growing a healthy lawn. Kill off the existing vegetation, add several inches of organic matter such as compost or peat moss and a low nitrogen slow release fertilizer into the top 6 to 8 inches of soil, and rake smooth.

Select more drought tolerant grasses like rhizomatous (turf-type) tall fescues, buffalo grass, and Habiturf® native lawn mix. Make sure the grass is suited to the climate and plant according to the label. Then sow the seeds, lightly rake and mulch or lay sod. Water often enough to keep the soil moist until the seeds sprout or the sod roots into the soil below. Then water thoroughly when the top few inches of soil are crumbly, but slightly moist to encourage deep roots.

Fertilize new, existing and stressed lawns with a low nitrogen slow release fertilizer like Milorga nite . It won't harm stressed lawns, young seedlings or newly laid sod. It will encourage slow steady growth. Southern lawns can be fertilized in April and again in early June. In the north fertilize around Memorial Day. And if 2013 turns into another hot dry summer, it won't burn the lawn.

Mow high to encourage deeply rooted grass that is more drought tolerant and pest resistant.

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And mow often, removing only a third of the total height. Be sure to leave these short clippings on the lawn. They return moisture, nutrients, and organic matter to the soil.

Repair small dead and bare patches as needed. Use a lawn patch kit, grass seed and mulch. For small spots, loosen the soil surface, sprinkle grass seed and lightly rake. Or mix a handful of grass seed in a bucket of topsoil. Sprinkle the mix over the soil surface.

Do a bit more soil preparation when renovating larger dead areas in the lawn. Remove or kill any weeds that have filled in these areas. Till two inches of compost, peat moss or other organic matter into the top six inches of soil. Sow seed, rake and mulch or lay sod.

Overseed thin and sparse lawn. First, core aerate the lawn to improve soil conditions and increase seed-to-soil contact. Spread grass seed over the aerated lawn and water as needed. Or rent a slit seeder or hire a professional with this type of equipment. These machines slice through the soil and drop the grass seed in place, increasing the seed-to-soil contact which is needed for good germination.

Core aerate lawns that have more than one half an inch of thatch, those growing in compacted soils, or before overseeding. By removing plugs of soil you break through the thatch and create channels for water and fertilizer to reach the grass roots.

Spot treat weeds on lawns that need minimal repair. Wait at least until fall to treat new and overseeded lawns. Spot treating minimizes the use of chemicals and reduces the stress on already stressed lawns. As always read and follow label directions carefully.

Proper maintenance and a bit of cooperation from nature will help transform a lawn from an eyesore to an asset in the landscape.

*Gardening expert, TV/radio host, author & columnist Melinda Myers has more than 30 years of horticulture experience and has written over 20 gardening books, including *Can't Miss Small Space Gardening* and *The Lawn Guide – Midwest Series*. She hosts the nationally syndicated *Melinda's Garden Moment* segments, is a columnist and contributing editor for *Birds & Blooms* magazine and has a column in *Gardening How-to* magazine. Myers has a master's degree in horticulture, is a certified arborist and was a horticulture instructor with tenure. Her web site is www.melindamyers.com*