

# How to Grow a Falmouth Friendly Lawn

## TEST YOUR SOIL

Your soil pH should be 6.5 to 7.0. Below that, add lime that acts as a gatekeeper for plant nutrients.

- If you fertilize a lawn with a low pH, the nitrogen in the fertilizer won't be absorbed by the grass, short-circuiting the feeding and diverting the nitrogen into leaching and run-off.

The Master Gardeners offer soil testing clinics throughout the spring. You can contact them at the Cape Cod Extension Office in Barnstable by calling 508-375-6690. You can also bring in a sample to the Cape Cod Extension Office where they offer soil testing year round.

## ENRICH YOUR SOIL

Grass grows best with 6" of topsoil, which also helps to prevent nitrogen leaching. You can slowly build up the depth of topsoil by spreading a thin layer, 1/4' or less, of loam in spring or compost in fall on top of your grass.

- Loam that contains an equal blend of silt, sand and clay works best on the Cape.
- Use compost from your own compost pile or from a reliable commercial source to minimize impurities
- Overseed bare spots with a mixture of native fescues and perennial ryegrass; they need much less nitrogen than cultivars like Kentucky bluegrass.

If you decide to add nutrients to your lawn, you also can enrich soils by using organic fertilizers that contain organisms to promote soil conditioning through healthy biological activity.

## MINIMIZE ANY FERTILIZER NITROGEN

Recycled grass clippings and atmospheric deposition [mostly rain] are natural sources of nitrogen. In many cases this is all an established lawn needs—traditional Cape lawns endure for generations without any fertilizer.

If you feel you really have to use some fertilizer, buy only as much as you need for the area of your lawn.

- To determine lawn area, pace off its length and width. Assume

each pace equals three feet and multiply the length times the width to calculate the square footage of your lawn.

- A standard fertilizer bag covers 5,000 sq ft of lawn [or multiples thereof]; the coverage area is highlighted on the bag label.

Most bags are intended to apply nitrogen at the rate of about 1 lb N per 1000 sq ft of lawn. You can check the N rate yourself by dividing the nitrogen poundage [multiply the first number in the 3 number series highlighted on the label by the bag's weight] by the area it covers.

- For fescues and perennial ryegrasses, you only need 1 lb N/1000 sq ft of lawn for an entire year.

Use only as much of the bag as your lawn size needs; if you have a 2500 sq ft lawn, use only half of a 5000 sq ft bag. The label on the bag will tell you how

to set your spreader for a 1 lb N rate. If you want to apply a lesser rate, adjust the setting accordingly.

Don't fertilize walks and driveways; sweep them up to prevent damaging run-off.

## THE RIGHT FERTILIZER

It takes time for grasses to absorb nitrogen. If applied in water-soluble form, most of the nitrogen that grasses don't absorb immediately will run-off or leach into groundwater. Avoid sprays; instead, use granular or organic slow-release nitrogen formulations [see "Guaranteed Content" on the bag label].

- Such formulations, often labeled Water Insoluble Nitrogen (WIN), are released over a period of weeks or months, depending on the percentage of WIN [or slow-release].
- The WIN should be 30% or higher. Remember that the higher the WIN means we all win!
- Organic fertilizers tend to have a high WIN and also promote soil enrichment.

Buy straight fertilizer. Avoid combination products containing herbicides and/or pesticides ("weed & feed") that spread chemicals across your entire lawn. If you need a pre-emergent, try gluten meal, a natural byproduct of corn processing.

## WHEN TO FERTILIZE

Fertilize only when the grass is growing vigorously: fall and spring. Never fertilize in summer when grass is dormant or growing slowly—don't end up just feeding the weeds!

- If you fertilize only once, do it in the fall to promote root growth for long term health; use a 1 lb N-rate.
- If you fertilize in both spring and fall, adjust your spreader setting to apply only a 1/2 lb N-rate each time.

## MOW HIGH, RECYCLE CLIPPINGS

Grass should be about 3 inches long after cutting to help retain moisture and choke out weeds.

- Re-sharpen blades at least once a year. Dull blades tear instead of cut grass.

Leave clippings on the lawn. That's right, no raking! Recycled clippings are a slow-release source of nitrogen.

- Scientific studies show that clippings contain up to half the nitrogen that lawns receive
- Recycled clippings do not promote thatch; instead, they break down and disappear.

## USE CAPE-TYPE GRASS SEED

The best grasses for Falmouth are blends of mostly fine fescues or tall fescues mixed with some perennial ryegrass.

- These blends require minimal fertilizer and water. They also have good drought tolerance and most new varieties resist surface-feeding insects.

Bluegrass needs twice as much nitrogen and more watering. If your lawn is mostly bluegrass, overseed with fescues and rye grasses. Multi-cultures also are less susceptible to disease.

## PULL WEEDS

If you find weeds, pull them out by hand. If weeds are a severe problem, spot treat them with an organic spray.

## WATER DEEPLY

Established lawns require only one inch of water per week, including rainfall; once a week in early morning promotes deeper roots and stronger drought resistance.

- How do you measure an inch of water? Position an open tuna can near each sprinkler as you water. A full straight-sided can equals an inch of water.
- Use a rain gauge or leave out one can for the season to monitor rainfall.

Of course, remember to obey any water restrictions that may be in effect.

## GROW NATIVE SHRUBS

You can reduce the amount of lawn area by creating a naturalized planting of low maintenance native shrubs and plants. Contact either the Master Gardeners at the Cape Cod Extension Office 508-375-6690: the Cape Cod Conservation District at 508-771-8757 or WBNERR at 508-457-0495 for suggested plant materials.



For more information on Preserve Falmouth Bays and Ponds please visit: [www.geocities.com/ashmet2001](http://www.geocities.com/ashmet2001) or contact us at [fllawn@cape.com](mailto:fllawn@cape.com)

Sponsored by the Town of Falmouth Selectmen and Ashmet Plume Citizens Committee