

Spring in the Garden

Other things in the world may be uncertain right now, but there is one thing you can count on - Spring is finally here. It's time to get out into your yard and garden and enjoy the fresh air and sunshine.

Now is the time to finish cleaning up your yard and gardens if you haven't already. Prune back dead limbs on trees and shrubs and dead plant material on perennials like peonies. Rake up any leaves that fell late in the winter. Any plant material that does not show signs of insects or diseases may be composted.

Prune spring-flowering shrubs after they have bloomed. Make sure all your gardening equipment and tools, such as lawn mowers and sprayers, are in good shape so that they are ready to go when you need to use them.

Many cool-season annual weeds, such as chickweed and henbit, are still in lawns and garden beds. These weeds will die once the weather gets warmer toward the end of spring. However, it is best to pull them up and discard them before they go to seed to minimize the amount of these weeds you will have next winter.

I get a lot of calls about annual bluegrass (*Poa annua*). This is an annual bunchgrass that is usually most noticeable late in winter and early in spring. Annual bluegrass actually germinates in September or October. At that stage the grass is really small and not noticeable in fescue lawns. But once the plants start blooming in April, they are really obvious, especially if your lawn is a little thinner than it should be. Like henbit and chickweed, annual bluegrass will die in warm weather. But like those plants, if you let it go to seed you are setting yourself up for more problems the next year.

You can spot-spray patches of annual bluegrass with a generic herbicide to kill them before they go to seed. You can also use a pre-emergent in the fall, as you would for crabgrass. But be aware that if you use the pre-emergent, you will not be able to reseed your fescue lawn in the fall.

A better solution for controlling annual bluegrass than using pre-emergent is to use cultural controls to encourage a thick and healthy fescue lawn. A robust lawn will shade out seedlings of annual bluegrass and keep it from spreading. To encourage a healthy lawn, don't mow grass too short. Fescue should never be mowed shorter than 2.5 inches. When you water, irrigate infrequently but deeply. Your grass will develop a better root system and withstand drought more easily. Compacted soil and poor drainage will also result in a thin, weedy lawn. You can alleviate soil compaction by aerating. But be careful with your timing - if you aerate after you've seeded in the fall, you can lower the germination rate of your grass seed. Another factor that can cause patchy lawns is shade. One way to get around this is to plant shade-loving plants where you don't get enough sun to produce a good stand of fescue. Another is to use a blend of Kentucky bluegrass and fescue when you reseed your lawn in the fall. The Kentucky bluegrass is

more shade-tolerant than fescue and will fill in the gaps between fescue plants, producing a thicker, healthier lawn. Look for a seed mix that is about 5:1 fescue seed to Kentucky bluegrass seed.

You can fertilize warm-season grasses such as zoysiagrass and bermudagrass in April. Don't fertilize cool-season grasses again until September. Ideally, you should do a soil test every two to three years to determine the proper amount of fertilizer to apply. If you didn't get a chance to do a soil test this year, a good rule of thumb is to use 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet for all warm-season grasses except for St. Augustinegrass. Use half the amount of nitrogen if you have St. Augustinegrass.

If you have any questions about your yard and garden, please call 336-753-6100 or email susan_hawkins@ncsu.edu.