Warm-Season Turfgrass Spring Season Maintenance

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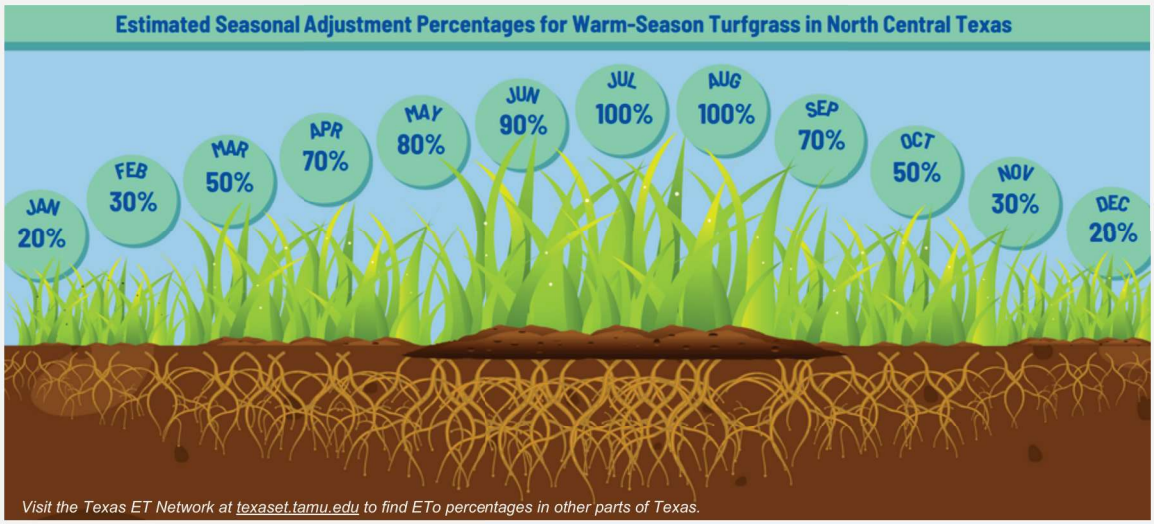
According to the calendar, spring arrives on, or near March 20, but it's not unusual to experience spring-like weather much earlier, only to see winter-like temperatures return. These spikes of warm weather make it tempting to plunge head-first into the landscape and start checking off items on that long spring-time prep to-do list. Before diving in, here are three important primary lawn care practices and how to approach them this spring.

Watering

Warm-season turfgrass doesn't require regular watering until it is actively growing; typically occurring between May and October. Similar to fall, irrigation demand is much lower in spring than in summer. The water need of turfgrass or any plant varies throughout the year depending on available sunlight, temperature, humidity, and rainfall frequency. For example, turfgrass in the shade generally requires less water than in full sun. While rainfall amounts can vary, it's often enough during spring to minimize supplemental watering. Overwatering during this time of year can encourage warm-season turfgrass diseases such as take-all-root-rot (TARR) (caused by *Gaeumannomyces graminis*). Following weekly watering recommendations from local resources like Water My Yard (*watermyyard.org*) and Texas ET Network (*texaset.tamu.edu*) can help prevent overwatering and reduce water waste.



An irrigation system evaluation can be a simple walk around each irrigation zone while operating, to identify obvious problems that affect the system's performance. Be on the lookout for spray heads that are broken, not spraying properly, blocked or obstructed, or spraying onto the street, sidewalk, or other hard surfaces. Take irrigation efficiency to the next level with a catch-can test to find the distribution uniformity and precipitation rate by following this publication's instructions: Swanson C. and Fipps G. 2023. Landscape Irrigation Efficiency. AGEN-PU-219.

Mowing

Mowing is one of the most important lawn maintenance tasks we do regularly. It impacts health, appearance, and rooting depth. Even though warm-season turfgrass doesn't start actively growing until air temperatures reach 80 degrees F or more, and may not need to be mowed, it could be a beneficial practice in early spring to help manage leftover winter weeds or emerging summer weeds. Returning clippings in the summer can improve soil health by adding nutrients and building organic matter. However, if weed presence is heavy, be sure to bag and dispose of any weed seed heads to prevent spreading. It is important to minimize turf stress by following appropriate mowing practices that support overall turfgrass health.

As temperature increases, mowing more often may be necessary to maintain the recommended height of cut and keeping true to the 1/3 rule of never removing more than a third of the grass blade at a time. Sharpening the blades is a must for all mowers to ensure a clean cut and springtime is the perfect time to service your equipment.

Fertilizing

For warm-season grasses, the first nitrogen fertilizer shouldn't be done until after the grass has greened up and it's been mowed two or three times. This shows the grass is actively growing and ready to use fertilizers. Remember, mowing weeds doesn't count! This application will probably be needed about six weeks after the last expected spring frost. Fertilizing too early will only stress the turf and promote diseases.

The amount of nitrogen fertilizer depends on many factors, including species, age, environmental conditions, growth rate, and homeowner expectations. Leaving grass clippings when mowing (mulching) adds nutrients to the soil, reducing the need for supplemental nitrogen. Older lawns generally have more organic matter in the soil and require less fertilizer than newer lawns. A single application should not exceed 1lb of nitrogen per 1000 sq-ft. We recommend using a fertilizer with at least 50% slow-release product. Consider conducting a soil test, especially if one hasn't been done in the past few years, and then use the recommendations to build a fertilization plan for the growing season. In Extension, we like to say "Don't guess, test."

City	Average last spring frost date	First nitrogen application
Harlingen, McAllen	No freeze	March 1
Corpus Christi, Laredo	Jan. 30	March 15
Houston, Victoria	Feb. 14	April 1
Austin, San Antonio, Waco	March 1	April 15
Abilene, Dallas, El Paso	March 16	May 1
Lubbock, Midlan	March 31	May 15
Amarillo	April 15	June 1

Summary

The bottom line is do not force the lawn to green-up. It's best to ease the lawn from its winter slumber as the temperature and light conditions become favorable for growth. After the second or third mowing of the year overall plant health should be evident enough to help inform management decisions. For additional information on turfgrass care and maintenance contact your County Extension Agent or refer to these publications:

- Chalmers D.R. and James A. McAfee. 2007. Lawn Fertilization for Texas Warm-Season Grasses. E-437.
- Grubbs B. 2019. Mowing Recommendations for Warm-Season Turfgrasses. ESC-052.
- Young-Ki J. 2023. Uncovering the Mystery Behind Turf Loss this Spring. PLPM-PU-105.

Information presented here has been adapted from the Texas A&M Extension Texas Lawn Companion