

Getting the most out of your grass

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By Patti Brandt for the Daily News |

Spring has come a little early to mid-Michigan, bringing with it the call of the wild -- the wild yard, that is.

To spruce it up you can get your hands dirty, or you can pay an expert.

Either way, spring is the time to fire up the lawnmower, give the grass its first dose of fertilizer, treat for crabgrass while it's in the germination stage, and kill those grubs before they kill your lawn.

Woody's Lawn Services, 1400 S. Eight Mile Road, has been out mowing, raking, spreading fertilizer and taking down trees for several weeks, said owner Brandon Woodcock.

Just about anyone can mow a lawn, Woodcock said, but for the bigger yard jobs -- tree removal and landscaping -- it's better to hire a pro.

Woody's has three full-time employees, as well as a professional tree climber who uses a safety harness and can go where the truck buckets don't fit.

And while it may be easy to mow a lawn, laying down fertilizer can be tricky, Woodcock said.

"It's easy to burn the grass and it's easy to stripe the grass."

He has a trick up his sleeve -- adding baby powder to the fertilizer spreader. That way you can see where you've been and can avoid overlap, which is what can burn a lawn. The powder dissolves when it rains and is non-toxic.

If you're doing your own mowing, Woodcock said to set the mower blades at 2.5 to 3 inches in the spring and fall, but raise them to about 3.5 inches for the summer. Leaving the grass taller in the hottest weather keeps it from drying out and burning, and makes it better able to withstand draughts, he said.

Woodcock also recommends dethatching a lawn at least once a year, preferably in the spring, and aerating at least every other year.

Dethatching thickens a lawn by removing yellow grass that may show up, especially after a long, hard winter, Woodcock said. The dead grass won't come back and it will gum up or block root growth so new grass can't grow, he said.

Aerating a lawn, or removing 2-inch plugs, will soften the lawn and allow the water and grass seed to settle into the holes, giving a lawn a deeper root system. A stronger root system makes it healthier and better able to withstand stress.

One of the worse things for damaging a yard is lawn grubs. The white grubs live in the soil and feed off the roots, leaving irregular patches of brown grass that can be lifted off the lawn like a rug.

Not only do they kill a lawn, grubs attract pests like moles that use them as a food source.

"That's a telltale sign," Woodcock said. "If you have a bunch of holes that's what they're after."

But setting out traps is not the way to get rid of moles, Woodcock said. You have to go to the source -- the grubs.

"You get rid of the grubs, you get rid of the moles," he said.

Other pests, like ants and fleas, also will tear up a yard pretty quickly, Woodcock said. Treating for grubs will take care of those pests, too, he said.

"Grub control also kills 500-plus different species of insects," he said.

Lawns are second nature to Woodcock, who has been in business for himself since 2004 and has more than 300 customers.

"It's kind of cool to be your own boss," he said.

He said he picked up his work ethic from his father, who owned a body shop, and from his brother, who had his own lawn care business.

Other pesky lawn problems, Woodcock said, include uneven coloring, bare spots and bumps. Uneven coloring can be caused by a dry lawn, and grass should optimally be watered every other day, or a minimum of once a week if there is no rain.

But different kinds of grass are different colors and can give a yard a multi-toned look. When buying grass seed to fill in bare spots, Woodcock suggests taking a sample of lawn to a fertilizer company to have it analyzed. That way you'll buy the right seed, he said.

Cohoon's Elevator, 802 Townsend St., can provide a lawn analysis and recommends removing and bringing in a square of sod that can be plugged back into your yard when done.

Bare spots in a yard should be covered with screened top soil before seeding. After spreading the seed throw wet straw over it and water every day until the grass germinates, Woodcock said.

Bumps in the lawn can be taken care of with a lawn roller.

"It flattens everything out and makes your grass grow uniformly," Woodcock said.

For those who don't want to use a lot of chemicals on their lawns, the best thing to do is mulch, Woodcock said.

"If you can put mulcher blades on your mower and don't bag your grass, you'll use a lot less fertilizer," he said.

The clippings feed the grass and help to hold the moisture in, keeping the lawn greener, he said.

But many people don't like to mulch, he said, so Woody's Lawn Service collects all the grass clippings and composts them, using them in landscaping.

Wood from trees that have been removed or trimmed also is recycled. What isn't sold to local companies for woodworking is burned in woodstoves to heat the homes of Woodcock and his four employees.

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