Managing a wet lawn

Provided by the Turfgrass Growers Association

Following the wetter winter months and after heavy rainfall, lawns may become saturated. Here, we offer some guidance on managing a wet lawn.

It doesn't matter if your lawn is old or new, wet ground conditions are best avoided. If you have an old lawn which has been heavily used over a long period of time, it is quite likely that the soil has become compacted by the trampling action of feet. However, a new lawn will also suffer from compaction, particularly if it is walked on when the ground is wet. Grass roots need air to grow well and walking on wet soil squashes the air out of it.

If you have recently laid a new lawn with good quality lawn turf, it is best to keep off it until the surface has been stabilised while the new roots that are produced by the turf grow into the soil. Most people spend a lot of time getting the surface of their lawn level before laying turf and this can easily be undone by walking around on it when it is waterlogged.

One of the easiest and most attractive ways to avoid walking on the lawn is to lay a row of stepping stones across it. Not only does this prevent feet from getting muddy, but it also prevents damage to the structure of the soil.

Aerating the lawn is the answer. Keeping the lawn well aerated will make the turf healthy with deep roots. In healthy turf, good soil structure and channels beneath the surface caused by earthworm activity and by naturally occurring dead grass roots, help water to move away from the surface of the lawn.

You can help these natural aerators and you do not need specialist equipment to aerate your lawn (though if it is a big lawn this would make it easier). Use a garden fork pushed into the lawn to a depth of 100mm when the soil is relatively dry, pulling back on the fork slightly before lifting it out and pushing it in again 100mm further on, working your way across the lawn. This will make cracks in the soil beneath the lawn, helping water move deeper into the soil, drawing it away from the surface. If you brush dry sand into the holes made in the surface of the lawn after aeration, this improves the soil at the surface of the lawn, keeping it drier. Changing the soil structure by adding sand improves drainage, but it is surprising what a large amount of sand is needed to make a significant difference on a heavy, clay soil.

In many cases it is possible to improve drainage simply by laying the new turf over soil that has been improved by raking in coarse sand. If this does not do the trick, pipe drainage systems allow water to be led away from the lawn to a nearby drain or soakaway. Whether it is necessary to lay drainpipes will depend on the location of the lawn and the soil type. The best time to drain a lawn is before it is laid. If you are making a new lawn and you suspect that the site is badly drained, this is an ideal opportunity to get the drainage of the site right. It is a lot easier and less disruptive to do it at this stage than later on.

As well as making the lawn muddy, wet conditions encourage moss and other primitive plants like algae (which makes a green slime on the surface of the lawn), liverworts (makes plates of green plant tissue on the surface) or dog lichen (makes grey and black plates of plant tissue on the surface).

So try to keep off your lawn when it is wet. You may damage the soil structure - and remember that new lawns in particular do not have a stable surface, making the soil beneath them more vulnerable.

For further guidance on looking after your lawn, visit
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