

Gardening 101 Lesson Eleven – Lawns and Vegetables

Lawns

Grass lawns are somewhat unnatural. None of the traditional components of turf are native to North America; they've all come to us from Europe and have had to adapt. Then, unlike other plants, we let these grasses grow only so far but cut the tops off regularly so turf never gets a chance to mature like other plants.

That said, grass lawns were introduced as an easy-care attractive solution to fill large spaces and to frame a house or views and they still work well in this capacity.

It's not too difficult to grow and care for a nice green grass lawn. Here are the basics:

1. If starting from scratch, seed the lawn in the fall or spring with a grass mix suitable for the situation (shade mix for a shaded location, for example) or else lay sod. In either case, keep the area evenly watered until the grass has rooted well. It's best not to cut new grass until it's 10cm (4 inches) tall.
2. Hand dig out weeds. The best time to do this is in the spring, preferably while the soil is somewhat damp but stay off the lawn until you can step on it without leaving an indentation in the soil.
3. Re-seed bare spots. Spring and fall are the best times to do this.
4. In the spring, get rid of thatch which can interfere with proper health of grass.
5. Aerate the lawn once a year or so; aerating is also best done in the late summer or spring.
6. When cutting, set your mower to the proper level (shorter in the spring and fall; longer in the summer or any other time when it's dry).
7. Don't bother to rake the grass clippings unless they are very long. Long clippings can go in the compost heap.
8. Ideally a lawn should receive about 2.5 cm (1 inch) of water a week. During a drought, grass will go dormant and will quickly revive once rain falls. If you have to water, give the lawn the 2.5cm all in one go.
9. Feeding a lawn by applying a thin layer of compost or bagged manure once or twice a year is a good idea.

Consider switching to other groundcovers if grass just doesn't do well in your yard Dutch white clover, low growing native thyme, ajuga, and periwinkle are some possible alternatives.

Vegetables

First – what is a vegetable? There's no hard and fast botanical distinction; we eat various parts of the various plants we call 'vegetables' – the flower and stem of broccoli, the leaf of lettuce, the fruit of tomato, the root of beet, and so on. So in the broader sense, vegetables are just plants we grow to eat.

There's just nothing like being able to eat vegetables you've grown yourself. While most urban dwellers have small yards, it's easy to put aside a small space for vegetables and to have a pretty bountiful harvest.

IMPORTANT POINT – vegetables need good sun to grow well.

The best method to grow vegetables in a small garden is in a raised bed. Lee Valley Tools has some nifty pre-formed corners into which standard wood planks can be inserted to create a rectangular box. This creates a nice deep container into which good soil is shoveled. Because the containers are relatively small, they can be seeded and weeded from the sides quite easily and you can plant them very intensively and crowd lots of vegetables into the box. Root crops such as carrots and beets need deep soil so they are ideally suited to raised beds but leafy crops such as lettuces, kale and Swiss chard also do well. All these vegetables grow from seed planted directly into the garden.

Larger vegetables such as tomatoes, beans, or peas need more room and some support in an urban garden. Beans and peas grow readily from seed but because tomato seeds take a while to germinate and grow, it's best to plant seedlings raised indoors from seed or seedlings purchased in the spring. For a zone 5 garden, for instance, plant seeds indoors in late March or early April and plant seedlings outdoors in late May or even early June. You can grow tomatoes in amongst flowers in the garden beds too; just be sure there's enough sunlight and room for the plant.

Some vegetables such as cucumbers or squash grow on vines and vines can take up a lot of ground space. However, as long as the fruit is a smaller variety (for instance, 'Sweet Dumpling' squash), vines can be very successfully trained up sturdy supports so that they occupy little ground space and grow vertically. In fact, tomatoes are really vine plants and are normally grown in this manner.

When in doubt, go to the seed section of a gardening store and read the labels; they give good directions on the best way to plant and grow that particular vegetable.

Next Lesson: Armchair Gardening