

LOVE YOUR

Whether you lust after lush, smooth, precision-cut stripes or you're delighted to see daisies dotting the grass, you need to know how to look after your lawn. **Adrienne Wyper** has some top tips

LAWN

After a cold, wet winter the 'green, green grass of home' may not be looking its best, with moss, bare patches and damaged edges. Grass growth speeds up from May, so now's the time to tend to it.

Lawns were introduced in the 18th century as a design element in the gardens of wealthy landowners to echo the surrounding pastoral scenery. So having even a small square of grass next to your house became a status symbol. But back then lawn-owners had staff to keep them pristine.

The first lawnmower was invented in the UK in 1830. You can learn about the history of grass-cutters at

the British Lawnmower Museum in Southport, Merseyside – visit <http://www.lawnmowerworld.co.uk>.

There have been technological advances over the years, from ride-ons to hovers to robots, which as well as mowing on their own, could soon learn to recognise and avoid injuring hedgehogs, following research at Oxford University.

No-mow zone

May is probably the lawn's time of fastest growth, and that's why for the past five years British conservation charity Plantlife has been running a No Mow May campaign.

By encouraging people to allow their grass to grow for the whole of the month, the charity is aiming to encourage an increase in wildflowers, which provide nectar for pollinating insects.

Since the 1930s, some 97% of wildflower meadows in the UK have disappeared, and Plantlife hopes this campaign will redress the balance.

Research shows that varied grass lengths are best for biodiversity. The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) even suggests gardeners avoid mowing from March to the end of August to benefit invertebrates including butterflies and moths.

Basic lawn care

Neaten the lawn's edges around your flowerbeds, ideally using a half-moon edging tool, though a spade will do.

If you have bare patches, you need to reseed. The Lawn Association recommends using a mix of native species. Fescues (a genus of flowering plants belonging to the *poaceae* grass family) bind the turf, giving it density and shading roots. Bent grasses are used for finer finishes, such as bowling greens and golf courses. Dwarf rye grass is not native to the UK but is often used for its fast growth, although it's not very drought tolerant.

Avoid reseeding in hot, dry weather as new growth needs moisture. Prepare the lawn by weeding, removing moss, mowing and raking out debris. Sprinkle on grass seed, a small handful per square metre, then tread into the soil. Water daily for six weeks (or choose a time when rain is forecast), then you should be set to mow the new growth.

For the first trim of the year, don't take off more than a third of the grass height. As growth rate speeds up, you can take off a little more each time. Mowing less often will make your lawn appear greener, as more leaf and less root is visible.

Don't mow when grass is wet, as

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the damp clippings will clog up the mower and sit in clumps on the lawn. Nor should you mow when it's frosty, as you risk damaging the lawn.

Although lawns are resilient and will bounce back from droughts, they can also suffer in hot weather – but there are ways you can help. Ideally in autumn, rake out dead growth to aid drought tolerance. Aerate the lawn by spiking it all over with a garden fork to help water penetrate down into the roots.

During periods of hot, dry weather,



set mower blades higher to leave the grass longer and stronger.

Watering the grass can be expensive if you have a water meter, or forbidden if there's a hosepipe ban, but you can use grey water – water that's been used for washing-up, showers or baths – instead.

Sporty stripes

Striped lawns summon up tennis courts, bowling greens and cricket pitches, and a rusty wrought-iron roller standing in the shadows.

To create this traditional effect, you need a lawnmower with a rear roller, usually a rotary mower. Alternatively, buy a separate roller.

You need to mow and roll in neat rows, alternating direction. The rolling action flattens and bends the grass blades, meaning the light reflects at a different angle, giving the impression of two shades of green.

Leave the lawn behind

With the trend for gardens to be used as an outdoor living space, we're seeing more decking and paved areas for seating and dining. In a 2016 survey, 22% of gardeners said they were cutting down on the size of their lawns, with over half enlarging their flowerbeds. And 12% said they were getting rid of the lawn altogether.

That may be a step too far for some, but why not cut down on



maintenance and boost biodiversity by leaving a few areas to grow long, or let the whole lawn area grow and mow paths through what could become a wildflower meadow?

A Cambridge University college has experimented with not mowing a lawn. The King's College lawn was laid in 1772 and in 2020 it was left unmown and transformed into a beautiful wildflower meadow with poppies, ox-eye daisies and cornflowers.

As well becoming better looking,



How to make your own compost

Compost – often dubbed ‘black gold’ – is soil-conditioning fertiliser for your garden. Here’s what you need to know

All living things die, decompose and become earth. The principle of composting is to help that process. When the bacteria in the compost bin feed on oxygen to break down waste, this ‘aerobic’ process results in a substance rich in nitrogen and other plant nutrients.

This makes a compost heap hot (you can help by turning its contents), which will kill harmful bacteria and weed seeds.

Without oxygen, bacteria feed on nitrogen. This ‘anaerobic’ process produces compost that’s low in nitrogen but still useful for improving soil texture, although weed seeds can survive.

Placing a compost bin on grass or soil allows easy access

“**A compost bin on grass or soil allows easy access by micro-organisms**

by micro-organisms. You can make one using a square frame of wooden pallets, with stakes at the corners. Wrap chicken wire round the sides, add your waste and top it with old carpet. When the compost is ready, cut away a section of the wire at the bottom, then replace it once you’ve removed the compost.

You can buy ready-made wood or plastic bins in many designs. If your bin will be in view, you might want to pay for a more attractive option.

What goes in the compost bin?

The RHS recommends 25%-50% ‘green waste’ – soft, leafy, green material such as grass clippings, weeds, prunings, fruit and veg scraps – and 75%-50% ‘brown waste’ – dry, woody material, hedge trimmings, dead stems, straw and torn-up or shredded paper and cardboard.

This mix sets the right carbon/nitrogen ratio – brown waste carbon-rich, green waste nitrogen-rich. As a rule of thumb, cut everything into



pieces no thicker than your... thumb. Your compost will be ready in six months to two years. Turning it regularly will speed up decomposition. When it’s ready, compost is dark brown, crumbly and dry, with a texture like soil. It’s usual to have some uncomposted bits; simply put them back in the bin.

If you have no garden, how about a wormery? These contain special worms that digest raw food waste and small amounts of cooked food and garden waste.

Alternatively, bokashi bins (‘bokashi’ is Japanese for ferment) will take all types of food waste, topped with a layer of bran with beneficial micro-organisms.

Wormeries and bokashi bins produce a small amount of compost, which can be used on potted plants, as well as a nutrient-rich liquid that is an excellent plant food.

the meadow supported three times more species of plants and insects. It also saved carbon emissions due to reduced mowing and fertilisation, and reflected more sunlight than the lawn, helping to cool the city.

Alternatively, consider adding in plants that need less looking after, such as red creeping thyme or camomile or clover.

Avoid artificial grass

Don’t be tempted by fake grass if your lawn is hard to maintain.

Covering the ground with a layer of plastic is bad for the environment, smothering worms and preventing water absorption.

It also tends to get very hot to walk on when the sun shines, you have to vacuum up fallen leaves and other debris (nature can’t tidy up for you) and it retains the smell of dog urine.

The microplastics artificial lawns shed also contaminate soil, impede drainage and risk flooding. And once installed, it lasts only around a decade and cannot be recycled.

There was a surge of interest in artificial grass during the Covid lockdown, when people were spending a lot more time in their own backyards, but demand has fallen since then. And its use at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show has been banned since 2022.

But with a little effort, you’re likely to enjoy your lawn more, whether it’s a close-cropped sward worthy of the England First XI, flowery drifts of prairie-style planting – or something in between. 🌱