

CENTIPEDEGRASS

A Brief Guide to Proper Care and Management

(Prepared especially for Residents of Myrtle Trace)

CENTIPEDEGRASS

First of all, I have noticed over the past 22 years of living in Myrtle Trace that one of the major contributing factors in the loss of Centipedegrass is that of improper fertilization -- both in timing and in amounts applied. Because of its peculiar root structure and growth habit, Centipedegrass is often called the 'Poor Man's' bentgrass. Please, **DO NOT** apply too much fertilizer to this grass. No more than two applications per year will be needed. A spring application should take place somewhere around mid-to-late April (after the last anticipated frost date of April 10-11) and the last application is best applied in late August to late September.

What kind of fertilizer to use?? Just about any old cheap type found at your local Wal-Mart or K-Mart, say an 8-8-8 or 10-10-10 or even 6-6-6. There is **absolutely** no earthly reason to buy an expensive blended-type fertilizer; especially for the fall application. If some selective weed control is desired, the spring application may be best accomplished by using one of the "Weed and Feed" type fertilizers which has been specially designed for use on Centipedegrass (be very careful with this -- the wrong type can devastate your lawn).

How much to apply?? This shouldn't be a real problem, but , unfortunately, it exists. It is a case of the usual mistaken practice of believing that if a little does a lot of good, a whole bunch will work miracles -- and overnight, to boot!! **WRONG, WRONG, WRONG.** Let's say you are using a 10-10-10 fertilizer. Since Centipedegrass will thrive on **minimal** amounts of Nitrogen (no more than 1 to 1 1/2 pounds of actual Nitrogen per 1000 square feet of grass per **year**), you should apply no more than 5 to 7 1/2 pounds of fertilizer from the bag per application (A fifty pound bag of 10-10-10 fertilizer contains 5 pounds of actual Nitrogen -- 10% x 50 pounds; thus, 10% x 5 pounds = 1/2 pound actual Nitrogen). Remember -- Centipedegrass is **not** supposed to have a deep emerald-green color. By nature, it is healthiest when it is slightly greener than apple green. Having too much color indicates too much Nitrogen and this situation invariably leads to increased insect and disease problems.

Proper watering of Centipedegrass seems to cause a considerable amount of concern on the part of homeowners wherever this grass is grown. Using common sense should simplify matters for practically all users of Centipedegrass. First of all, this plant is not desert plant nor an aquatic plant!! It falls somewhere in between, so this tells us that soil moisture should be kept at a reasonable level at all times if a decent lawn is to be expected.

There are **no set rules** when it comes to water management -- only you can control the additional amount of water supplied to your lawn. Mother Nature is not always kind to us and we are sometimes plagued with too much water and, at other times, with barely enough to settle the dust. *Theoretically*, Centipedegrass should have at least one acre-inch of water per week on a year 'round basis if it is to thrive. I'll not bore you with figures, so suffice it to say that your lawn should be watered when you cannot easily push a screwdriver or table knife into the underlying soil. This only takes a few minutes to check -- even if you are checking several locations throughout your lawn.

Believe me, it works!! After a few times of doing this, you will have a much better idea as to when watering is needed and, unless I miss my guess, you will no longer need to spend the time in spot checking (unless you are an absolute perfectionist).

People almost always ask -- **when** is the best time to water. My response is usually "whenever you find the time to do so". However, if you are fortunate enough to have an "automated", clock-driven irrigation system, my recommendation is to have the system start at about 4 or 5 AM on pre-selected days and have each station set for a pre-determined amount of time in order to adequately wet the area in question. Because of soil differences, shade factors, etc., I have never yet found a situation where **all** stations in an irrigation system can be set for the same length of time and do an adequate job of watering. If you have 5 stations, you will probably quickly learn that one or two of them may require as much as 30 minutes, whereas the other stations may require as little as 15 minutes or less to do the job properly. Again, common sense should prevail.

For those of you who do not have an automated system, all is not lost. I certainly don't intend to tell you to get up out of a nice warm bed at 4AM in order to water your lawn!! However, please try to do any watering of your lawn early enough during the daylight hours so that "free" water does not remain on the leaf blades during the night hours. When water stands on the leaves during the dark hours, the risk of disease problems increases several-fold. And, before somebody raises the question, "But won't watering during the heat of the day "burn" the leaves because of scalding", let me assure you that this will **not** happen. It is only when we experience standing soil water for a period of many hours that serious damage to turf will occur.

Now that you have properly fertilized and watered your beautiful Centipedegrass lawn, the fun really begins!! Break out the mower and do your aerobic exercises with gusto. Seriously, proper mowing is the third (but no less important) step in managing what you hope will be the prettiest lawn in the area. If this step is done incorrectly, you can be assured that major problems will arise. The greatest problem lies in the **frequency** of mowing. Centipedegrass, as with all other turfgrasses, should only be mowed **when needed**; not because it is Saturday or Wednesday or whatever the calendar says. A basic rule-of-thumb is that no more than 1/3 of the existing leaf blade surface should be removed at one mowing (*i.e.*; if the grass is 3 inches high, remove no more than 1 inch). Based on this, it is obvious that your lawn will not grow uniformly each and every week during the year, so mowing frequency should be adjusted accordingly. For example, if you fertilize and water your lawn today, the growth rate will be very rapid for a week or two, then drop off during the next few weeks. Because of this, you may have to mow every 5 or 6 days for a couple of weeks, then back off to as little as one mowing every 12 to 16 days.

Enough said about frequency -- let's move on to height of cut. When it comes to Centipedegrass, I find that people become very confused as to the proper mowing height -- especially with respect to the seasons of the year. All too many of us set the mower at a given level and leave it there for as long the mower will cut grass!! Let me assure you that this practice has probably destroyed more lawns than all of the weeds, diseases and insects combined. Just as your favorite flowering plants require different cultural practices at different times of the year, so do lawn grasses. In the spring months, when the Centipedegrass is recovering from the effects of winter weather, the mower should be set at about 2 3/4 to 3 inches. Stay at this setting until about late May or early June, when the grass enters its most active growth period of the year (the heat of summer). At this time, the height of cut can be set at 2 1/2 inches -- **PLEASE**, do not go lower than this -- unless you want to fight an increase in weed populations. Since Centipedegrass is more of an "open-growth" type of grass, low mowing exposes

more of the underlying soil surface and this encourages the germination of many of our common weed seeds. At the same, more exposure to sunlight increases evaporation of more moisture from the soil and this, in turn, increases the need for more watering. As we enter the cooler and shorter days of fall, the growth of Centipedegrass will slow down but there is no real need to change the height of cut. However, after Jack Frost has done his work and the grass is basically dormant (brown), you may **drop** the height of cut to about 1 1/2 or 2 inches in order to "neaten" things up for the winter months. Just remember to reset the mower when spring comes next year!!

One final word regarding mowing operations -- it is not **truly** necessary to remove clippings at each mowing. As a matter of fact, it is usually recommended that clippings be left (especially if you use a mulching-type mower) since this provides additional nutrients to the underlying soil as the clippings decompose. If, however, you are forced into a situation where there are too many clippings produced, it is perfectly logical to bag them in order to avoid "smothering" of the lawn.

Paul M. Alexander; 4-23-97

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NOTE: Many of these suggestions/recommendations are applicable to those of you who have St. Augustine Grass as a lawn . However, one additional fertilizer application, using a 4-8-8 or 5-10-10 material, can be made in late July to mid - August. If using 4-8-8, apply 12 pounds of product per 1,000 square feet; if using 5-10-10, apply no more than 10 pounds per square feet. In addition, St. Augustine does much better if mowed at a height of 3 to 3 ½ inches, especially during the summer months.