

Maintaining your lawn

You can enjoy the benefits of a healthy and water-efficient lawn all year round.

Many lawns are able to survive prolonged dry periods. Turf grasses adapt to dry weather by rolling up their leaf blades, reducing density by dropping leaves, going dormant (brown) by ceasing growth and developing a deeper root system. A brown lawn may not be dead, and can usually recover quickly once it receives water.

By following a few simple guidelines you can have a healthy lawn without wasting valuable water. Be sure to check the water restrictions in your local area before watering.

Saving water

Water only when your grass needs it

Environmental factors such as temperature, humidity and wind dramatically affect how much water your lawn needs, and therefore how frequently you need to water your lawn. Many people over-water without realising it. Over-watering is bad for your lawn's health and can contribute to the development of fungus and disease.

Tip: Before watering, look out for signs that your lawn needs water. When grass needs water, it begins to take on a blue-grey tint, and the blades curl up or wilt. In addition, footprints remain on the grass for longer than usual, as the grass doesn't bounce back.

Water deeply to encourage deep root growth

Water your grass only when it really needs it. This encourages the roots to grow deeper. Be sure to apply enough water each time to penetrate down to the root zone. Frequent shallow watering encourages weed germination, and also causes the grass plants to grow shallow roots, leaving the plant more susceptible to drought and to certain diseases.

Tip: Check the depth of your lawn's root zone. The most accurate way to do this is to dig a small hole and measure how far the roots go down.

Avoid creating run-off

Many people water the lawn until water begins to run off into the street or driveway. This wastes a lot of water, and isn't doing the lawn any good. If water starts to run off your lawn before you've been able to give it a deep watering, turn off the water for 15 to 20 minutes to let the ground absorb the water, and then continue watering as needed.

Let the rain do your work for you

Watch the weather. Rainfall is a free and easy way to water your lawn.

Tip: Use a rain gauge to determine how much rain you received, and then water only if needed.

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Aerating

Aerating your lawn once a year can increase the soil's infiltration rate (the rate at which it absorbs water), and reduce run-off problems. Many lawn problems are caused by soil compaction from people and vehicles moving over the lawn. To relieve compaction, a simple garden fork or lawn aerator can be used to aerate the soil. Work the fork backwards and forwards at approximately 10-centimetre intervals to open up the soil.

Fertilising

Fertilise sparingly, as using too much will encourage your lawn to grow too quickly. Slow-release fertiliser is best. Choose a low-nitrogen fertiliser, as too much nitrogen contributes to excessive growth and high water use. Your local garden centre can give you advice on fertilising your lawn. It is best applied in autumn or early spring, before good rainfall.

Tip: When washing your car, park it on the lawn and use a bucket for washing and rinsing. This way you can save water and fertilise your lawn—car shampoos use phosphates that are similar to many fertilisers.

Mowing

The way you mow your lawn can affect the amount of water it needs. Mow your lawn on the highest height setting to avoid scalping your lawn and to minimise evaporation from the soil below. Cut only the top third of the leaf area, leaving it at a height of 3 centimetres or more to ensure that roots are sheltered from the harsh sun. Regularly check your mower blades for wear, as grass will lose less water if cleanly cut rather than torn by blunt blades.

Tip: Reduce water loss even further by saving your lawn clippings to use as mulch on your lawn or garden.



Mulching mowers

Mowing your lawn more frequently at a higher height can be more work, but use of a mulching mower can lessen the workload. Mulching mowers chop the lawn clippings into fine particles and blow them back into your lawn. The clippings are so fine that you won't see them on the lawn; they won't form clumps like ordinary grass clippings.

Mulching mowers have a number of benefits:

- ◆ You don't need a catcher, making the mower lighter and more manageable.
- ◆ You don't have to stop to empty a catcher, so the job is quicker.
- ◆ By returning the grass clippings to your lawn, you save on fertiliser and water.
- ◆ Your lawn gains all the usual benefits of mulching—reduced evaporation, and reduced need for water and fertiliser.

Selecting turf

When you are laying new turf or reseeding existing turf areas, be sure to use a species that tolerates dry conditions. There is an ever-increasing range of turf types suitable for the Queensland climate.

Seek advice from a reputable turf producer or from the Queensland Turf Producers Association before making your choice.

Do you have more than you need?

Take a look at your garden to see if you need all the lawn you have.

- ◆ It is difficult for lawns to grow in full shade. Cover shaded patches with paving or mulch.
- ◆ Convert unused or unwanted lawn areas into areas of water-efficient plants.
- ◆ Pave an entertainment area or frequently used pathway.



Hints

- ◆ Check the water restrictions in your local area.
- ◆ Installing a rainwater tank and using your greywater are good alternatives to using your mains water supply. Check with your local council for rainwater tank and greywater use requirements.
- ◆ For further information on gardening with greywater go to <www.nrw.qld.gov.au/water>.

More information

Other water-efficient gardening guides are available on the Department of Environment and Resource Management website <www.derm.qld.gov.au>.