

# FACT SHEET

## LAWN CARE



## Lawn Care For Water Smart Home Gardens

### What is Water Smart Gardening?

Water Smart gardening is the practice of minimising water application to gardens whilst keeping gardens healthy in dry times.

### Caring for Lawns in Dry Times

Lawns are generally considered to be high water users in gardens. To keep lawns green and actively growing requires substantial amounts of water. There are several things gardeners can do to minimise the amount of water required by lawns whilst keeping lawns healthy.

### Mowing Height

Cutting lawns short promotes shallow root depth. Setting the mower to a high cutting height is recommended to ensure good root depth, which is best during dry times. Mulching mowers are helpful as they convert lawn clippings into mulch which improves the water holding capacity of lawns. Some types of grasses can develop a condition called thatch. This is a build up of material between the green tips of the grass and the soil. If thatch build up becomes deeper than 1cm then use a catcher and mow the lawn as low as possible, or use a metal rake to remove the mulch or hire a dethatching mower. It is recommended to use a catcher every sixth mow.

### Fertilising Lawns

During dry times it is best to refrain from using high nitrogen lawn fertilisers such as Lawn Greener and Lawn Booster type products. These products promote rapid growth and lush growth, neither of which are favourable in dry times where the objective is to have moderate growth and drought hardiness. Where moderate rainfall occurs a slow release organic fertiliser like pelletised poultry manure can be applied to provide the essential nutrients for lawns.

For lawns suffering drought stress applying a plant tonic such as liquid seaweed emulsion will assist in improving the drought hardiness of lawns. Seaweed can be applied either as a liquid and is easily applied as a 'click-on hose pack' or by using a pelletised poultry manure product containing seaweed or by using a granular seaweed that is added to a watering can.

### Improving the Water Holding Capacity of Soil

Improving the water holding capacity of soils is one of the most effective things gardeners can do to assist lawns during dry times. Adding organic matter such as composted screened cow manure or compost helps soils to hold moisture in the root zone. Organic matter acts like a sponge retaining moisture in the topsoil and assisting with aeration of soils.

### Aerating and Top Dressing

Lawns often become compacted over time especially in areas with regular foot traffic. Compacted soils will tend to shed water rather than absorb it. Many of the soils around Bathurst are clay component soils and these soils are particularly prone to soil compaction. It is best to aerate soils when lawns are actively growing in Spring. Aim to aerate your lawn when soils are moist not wet. For small areas of lawn you can manually aerate the lawn using a garden fork inserted at regular intervals of 20cm aiming to insert to at least half the depth of the tyne on the garden fork.



*Aerating lawns with a garden fork helps water to penetrate the topsoil.*

For larger areas lawn aerating shoes or commercial lawn aerators available from Hire Companies can be used. The aim with aerating is to create gaps or tunnels in the lawn which allow more air and water to penetrate the topsoil. After aerating the lawn can be top-dressed with composted screened cow manure, lawn top dressing or bulk composted product to fill the tunnels and increase the organic matter in the topsoil.

## Lawn Varieties

Lawns have varying drought tolerance. Many gardeners seek a lawn variety that is green in winter however the winter active lawn varieties are the least drought tolerant.

### Couch Lawn

Couch is a native Australian grass that can be established from seed or laid as turf. It is a drought hardy lawn that withstands a high level of wear from foot traffic. This lawn will appear brown in winter and has the disadvantage of sending out runners into garden beds if a definite edge is not maintained between the couch lawn and the garden beds. Many gardeners dislike couch lawns for this reason, however it does provide a low maintenance and drought tolerant option for Tablelands gardens.

### Kikuyu Lawn

Kikuyu is an African grass that grows by sending out runners. It is a rapidly growing grass that puts on rapid growth in response to rain or irrigation water and warm temperatures. It will appear brown in winter. The advantage of kikuyu is that it is generally hardy and good for stabilising steep banks. It is not considered to be highly drought tolerant due to its tendency for vigorous growth.

### Tall Fescue Lawn

Tall Fescue is a popular lawn type for Tablelands gardeners since it is a clumping grass with relatively fine leaf blades giving it a more lush appearance. It retains its vivid green colour in winter provided it has ample water and nutrients. Fescue can be sown from seed or laid as turf and is generally considered a high maintenance lawn that requires careful management in order to keep it growing strongly. In recent years this lawn variety has been particularly affected by lawn black beetle which feeds on the fescue roots and can cause rapid death to sections of the lawn. Fescue is not recommended as a drought tolerant lawn.



*Fescue lawns provide a green lawn for cold winter climates however they have low drought tolerance.*

## Artificial Lawn

Artificial lawns provide a Water Smart lawn alternative for small gardens or gardeners wanting a very low maintenance option compared to a conventional lawn. Synthetic or artificial lawn is rolled out and secured over a bed of sand, meaning that water infiltrates to the subsoil. This provides a superior Water Smart option compared to hard surfaces like paving where rainwater runs off. Artificial lawn can create a hot micro climate and some users report needing a shade sail or tree shade to keep the area sufficiently cool.

## Weed Control

Broad leaved weeds often become a problem in lawns particularly where bare patches occur during dry times. Use of the product 'Weed and Feed' is not generally recommended as Water Restrictions in combination with low soil moisture are not compatible with this product. Alternatively weeds should be hoed or manually removed before they set seed to reduce increases in the weed seed population in the soil.

## Rethinking Lawns

One feature of Water Smart Gardening is the recommendation to rethink lawns. Lawns are generally high water users on gardens so it is best to carefully consider if the lawn area in your garden can be reduced whilst still maintaining a functional and attractive garden. Options to lawns include low growing plants with stepping stones or paths, more gravel areas and low shrub and ground cover plantings. Once established Water Smart shrubs and groundcovers provide an attractive low maintenance option to conventional lawns.



*Steppers with decorative gravel and Water Smart groundcovers provides an attractive lawn alternative.*

## Bare Patches in Lawn

During dry times bare patches may develop especially in high foot traffic areas. It is best to keep the soil covered in these bare areas as high wind events and Summer thunderstorms can lead to soils being washed or blown from lawns. These areas can be spot seeded and watered with tank water. Greywater can be applied to lawns but is not recommended for lawn areas where children may be playing or sitting. If this is not possible then aim to keep the soil covered with a fine mulch like sugarcane mulch or soft fall playground mulch until more favourable seasons allow for lawn repair.

## For More Information

Speak to a turf supplier, local nursery professional or local landscape supplier.

**WATER** *Let's make it last.*

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