



Extension  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON  
IRON COUNTY

# NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column

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## Modify Lawn Care in Shade

Numerous shade trees in the yard and quality lawns oftentimes do not go hand in hand. However, there are guidelines to help achieve decent lawns in shade areas.

Start with growing the proper grass species for shade. Fine fescues, which include creeping red, hard, sheep, and chewings fescues, are the best choice. As a group these grasses are considered minimal maintenance and tolerate shade, but not extremely deep shade. They do not tolerate heavy traffic and do not recover quickly when damaged, however. Always try to reduce foot traffic as much as possible on shade lawns.

Fine fescues are the backbone of commercially available shade lawn mixes. Shade tolerant Kentucky bluegrass cultivars may also be in these mixes, along with perennial ryegrass. These can be used both to start a new lawn or to overseed existing thin lawns. If possible, prune shade trees to allow maximum light to reach the soil.

Once established, lawn care practices need to be modified for shade. Mow higher in shade so grasses have more leaf area to take in light. Mowing heights around three inches are good, if in doubt adjust your mower near or at the highest mowing height setting. Higher mowing heights benefit full sun lawns as well.

Fertilizing lawns in shade is the biggest adjustment compared to a full sun lawn. While thoughts may be to fertilize more when grass looks thin, do just the opposite. Shade lawns need less nitrogen than full sun lawns. The recommended nitrogen fertilizer rate for shade lawns is 1 to 2 pounds of actual nitrogen per season, ideally split into more than one application.

A suggested schedule would be to apply twice a season, once in mid-May and again in early September. Use fertilizer products containing controlled release nitrogen, such as sulfur-coated or polymer coated urea, IBDU, or ureaform. Milorganite and other organic nitrogen fertilizers containing water insoluble nitrogen (WIN) are also good choices.

Ground ivy (Creeping Charlie) is among the common weed problems in shade lawns. Lawns thinning out from the shade invite weed problems to move in. There are broadleaf herbicides available to apply; they will reduce but not eliminate the weeds. Getting lawns thicker by following the practices mentioned here is key to help keep weeds from invading. The same holds true with moss.

If these guidelines do not work, the shade is too deep. In these cases, consider shade tolerant ground covers and low growing plants as an alternative to lawns, or mulch the deep shade areas.



Interested in learning more about Horticulture in Iron County?  
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