

Growing St. Augustine grass in Jacksonville

While still a work in progress, I spent last year researching how to grow St. Augustine grass successfully. I am still on the educational trail, but I hope others can benefit from the path I forged!

Below are the lessons that I have learned from my research so far. It took a lot of time to gather and synthesize the information I have so far. It will be refined over time.

I give kudos to the Duval county extension for their guidance, knowledge and time. The extension office is a wonderful resource that many of us “city dwellers” don’t realize is available. Check it out!

- Overall principles and ideas
 - Timing is everything
 - Error on the side of less than more
 - In the past, I tried to “make up” for missed applications. Big mistake! It cost me my lawn.
 - The active ingredient in the product is more important than branding.
 - Protect yourself when using herbicides and pesticides. Cover up completely when using the product and READ the instructions.
 - Create a calendar to establish a solid and measured approach. Then, keep to it.
 - I have my separate Google calendar to keep me on time. Don’t forget rule number one. Timing is everything!
- Weeds
 - The term “weeds” is a subjective term and represents anything undesirable in a lawn.
 - Some “weeds” are grown in other environments and situations for much of the same “aesthetic” effect as our St. Augustine lawns.
 - Weeds are annuals (last one year) and perennials (come back year after year).
 - Like flowers, different weeds “bloom” at different times
 - There are summer weeds and winter weeds
 - There are two kinds of weed “killers”
 - Pre-emergent – before the weed breaks the ground surface in its growth stage.
 - Once weeds are established, pre-emergent killers lack effectiveness.
 - “Easily nipped in the bud.”
 - Post-emergent – after the weed breaks the ground surface in its growth stage
 - The more quickly addressed and before they grow larger the better.

- Know your weed
 - I use an app called “PictureThis”
 - You take a picture and it identifies the plant (weed/tree/flower/bush/etc)
 - Look up the scientific name for the plant on Google.
 - The scientific names are Latin (I believe), but each plant has one scientific name.
 - One scientific name can have many common names. So, common names can cause confusion.
 - Weeds can spread by roots, seeds, and stolons
 - Stolons is how St. Augustine spreads.
 - Find out what herbicide controls the various weeds you have.
 - For post-emergent weeds in St. Augustine grass, atrazine is commonly used. I believe it addresses a wide array of weeds that arrive with St. Augustine grass without hurting the St. Augustine grass.
 - For pre-emergent weeds, I used the herbicide Pendimethalin. I found it successfully controlled “the first invasion” of weeds in the spring
- Timing
 - A pre-emergent in Jacksonville FL should be spread in late February.
 - Lots of spring weeds germinate late Feb
 - Indicators that it is time to spread pre-emergent weed products are
 - 4-5 days that it is 65 to 70 degrees
 - Azaleas beginning to bloom are nature’s sign
 - A few weeks EARLIER is better than later.
 - The reason is once they germinate, pre-emergent herbicides are much less effective.
 - After the first application of pre-emergent herbicide, I re-applied it.
 - The second application should be done no more than 60 days from the first application.
 - This gets weeds that “bloom” later in the season
 - Use post-emergent weed killer to spot treat weeds that have emerged over time.

- Some weeds are too much like grass. This means that herbicides will not be able to differentiate between them and grass. Tall Flat Sedge is an example. You likely need to dig them up (They spread by roots, so you better get it all!). There are herbicides to kill Sedge, but it kills the grass as well.
 - Spread more pre-emergent herbicide in Mid-September to kill the winter weeds.
 - Watering
 - If you have a sprinkler system, track the projected weather and save a buck by letting nature take its course when possible.
 - Run the automated system when you see stress in how the grass looks.
 - Maybe only separate zone. Some will be dryer given their sun exposure.
 - Make sure your sprinklers are providing the appropriate amount of water and are covering your entire lawn
 - Look up YouTube on how to adjust your sprinklers. It only take a few minutes to learn how to adjust them and it's really easy.
 - Use peat moss to slow the sun's absorption of water.
 - Some areas have greater exposure and will brown out without sufficient water.
 - Florida is known for sandy soil which means water can wick away quickly.
 - Put some on, but not too thick.
- Bugs
 - I used the active ingredient Gamma-Cyhalothrin
 - I started with a low amount in spring and did another application 8 weeks later.
 - If you see places where animals are digging up your grass, there is likely to be bugs
- Fertilizer
 - Error on the side of caution.
 - Overfeeding can kill what you're trying to build. It's like the three bears. Just right! (Although I espouse starting out with baby bear's portion!)
 - Less is better and build up.
 - I use a Scott's mini spreader set to the lowest setting.
 - I'll adjust higher as I learn and experience more.
 - Use a product with a 65% slow release mechanism
 - You don't want to nice green quickly and a dead lawn to follow.

- Too much at once can open the lawn up disease, bugs and weed.
 - Weeds quickly take over dead lawn spots.
- I used Vigoro Florida Fertilizer 65% slow release nitrogen 29-0-3
 - 29-0-3 is the proportion of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K).
 - This is a common mix for Jacksonville, but when in doubt, get a soil test from your local agriculture extension. It usually costs less than \$10.
 - 29-0-3 is for the growing months.
 - The 29 number is nitrogen to foster growth.
 - I haven't gotten to the winter months yet, but my understanding is that the roots need to be strengthened during the winter. Root strengthening is done with potassium (the 3). So the third number of 29-0-3 should be increased and the first number should be decreased during December and January.
- Spread feedings out for 8 a year
 - I feed it every 4 weeks February, March, April, May. Then, hold back in the hottest months. Start again in September, but don't go past November.
Feeding in the winter with 29-0-3 is for the growing months.
- Avoid the hottest summer months for fertilizing. It can burn your grass if done at the wrong time. Remember: Timing is everything.

Good Luck and enjoy your grass.