

# Using Compost for Lawns

To decrease Fertilizer and Pesticide Use

## Why use Compost on your Lawn?

Compost is a great way to nourish roots and make a lawn stronger and greener. If you just spread compost on the surface, then ½ inch is about all you need at one time without harming the grass. But you will get much better results if you aerate the lawn first and get the compost down where it will do the most good.

The best way to do this is with a core aerator, which peppers the lawn with 2-3-inch-deep holes so air and nutrients can reach the roots. You can rent one and do the work yourself or turn it over to a lawn pro.

It is recommended that the best time to perform this type of work is in the fall. Aerating any earlier in the year may encourage weeds to get a head start.

Here are the recommended steps:

### Step 1: Determine the Need for Lawn Aeration

If you have noticed that your turfgrass isn't looking its best or that water has difficulty penetrating through the soil surface, it may be time to aerate your lawn. Clay soils and lawns that bear heavy foot and vehicle traffic are especially notorious for needing aeration as they become compacted over time. Using a shovel, dig a square-foot section of grass about six inches deep and examine. If the grass roots don't extend further than two inches deep into the soil, your lawn would benefit from aeration.

**Note:** Don't aerate a lawn that has been seeded or sodded within one year of planting.

### Step 2: Prepare the Lawn for Aeration

Water the lawn thoroughly one to two days prior to aerating your lawn.

Apply at least 1" of water to the grass; this can be measured by placing an empty tuna can in the middle of the watering zone. If the can is full, then 1" of water has been applied to the grass. Watering the lawn will help the aerator penetrate the soil and pull out soil cores much more easily. Flag irrigation heads and other hidden objects in the lawn so that you will avoid them when operating the aerator over this area. If you do not have an irrigation system, use a garden hose and sprinkler to water the lawn.

## Lawn Treated with Compost



## Lawn Before and After Compost



**Note:** Depending on your climate, the best time of the year to aerate cool-season grass, such as fescue, bluegrass or rye, is in August through October when the grass is breaking its dormancy and begins the period of active growth; the best time to aerate warm-season grass, such as Bermuda, Zoysia or St. Augustine, is April through June.

### Step 3: Aerate the Lawn

Run the core aerator over the lawn in a pattern that covers the area only once about 2-3 inches deep. If your yard is very compacted, you may need to aerate deeper which may require the service of a lawn pro unless you can rent equipment that will go deep enough (approx. 6 inches).

**Note:** A mechanical core aerator is the best equipment to use for aeration. The tines on this type of machine are hollow on the inside so that they pull soil cores out of the earth. Other aerators such as those with spikes don't work as well and may actually further compact soils. You can rent core aerators from most garden centers. Read the operator's manual carefully prior to use.

### Step 4: Apply Compost the Aerated Lawn

The soil cores can be left on the ground after aeration and allowed to decompose. Or, rake them into piles and throw in the compost bin. However, this isn't necessary as it should take about two to four weeks for the soil cores to break down naturally. Sprinkle ½ inch of compost (sand or peat moss can be used instead of compost) over the lawn and work it with a rake (leaf rake recommended) to fill in the holes.

**Note:** After aeration, apply grass seed and fertilizer to lawns as this is an ideal time to do so. Finally, give your lawn a good watering to work the compost down into the holes.

***Disclaimer:** This sheet contains general principles only, which may not be appropriate or safe for every property or project. Use good common sense. You assume the risk and are responsible for all consequences of your modifications to drainage flow or your property, for legal compliance, and for necessary permits and authorizations. The City of St. Charles is not responsible for your modifications and disclaims liability for your actions.*