

Topdressing Your Lawn

Topdressing turf grass areas is a very old concept that has only recently been catching on again among homeowners, contractors and municipalities. The quick, easy, convenient, and profitable venture involved with your typical modern lawn care programs is slowly trending back to more environmentally friendly practices with better results. Synthetic fertilizers and pesticides have been the typical ways we try to correct problem lawns, but they have taken a toll on our soils, environment and possibly our health as well. However, with the growing number of people trying to go the organic way, there has been a resurgence in the number of people going back to an age old natural system of topdressing to improve the quality of their lawn areas instead of using the modern methods.

What is topdressing?

Topdressing is the process of adding a thin layer of material over the turf or lawn areas. Typically anywhere from ¼ to ½ inch of material may be used. Many different products can specifically fix certain deficiencies that a lawn may have. These deficiencies can usually be determined by doing a simple soil test. One of the most commonly used products for topdressing is compost, because of its ability to correct most soil deficiencies with just one application. This can eliminate testing and having to do multiple different applications to correct problems. Many topdressing materials can be worked into the turf area and down to the existing soil by raking, washing it in with rain or sprinklers, using an aerator/aero-vator or just allowing it to settle on its own over time.

What is the best material for topdressing?

Topdressing materials vary greatly and are usually dictated by budget and need. Soil health should however be the most important component to any long term lawn care program. Most of the time the soil left after construction is never brought back to what is needed for healthy plant life. This increases our need for a lot of water and quick available nutrients just to keep the turf plants growing. By changing the soil and getting its ecosystem alive again, we can change our reliance on synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and watering on a daily basis to keep our lawn alive. Compost should be the number one choice for doing this because surprisingly Mother Nature typically works better than any man made options we can come up with. The compost should be made properly and “finished” to give the best long term results. High quality finished compost can be made with a variety of organic materials, (grass clippings, leaves, brush, food and compostable trash waste) with few fillers like sawdust or loam. It should look like a pile of rich dark black dirt with an earthy smell and no objectionable odors. If it is not, it isn't “finished”, and that can do more damage to the lawn than good. I recommend a product that has been done and tested by the US Composting Councils STA testing program to make sure the manufacturer is doing it right and are a reputable source.

Why should we topdress with compost?

Soil health, or soil quality is the continued capacity of soil to function as a vital living ecosystem that sustains plants, animals and humans. Unlike black dirt, topdressing with compost can improve soil biology by adding large amounts of organic matter and the beneficial microorganisms needed for a healthy ecosystem. Adding compost to the existing soil makes the plants more resistant to diseases and insects by improving the plants environment to grow, which in turn affects its overall long term health. Soil structure can also be improved by topdressing with compost. In heavy clay soils, compost improves drainage and porosity and makes it more friable or workable. In sandy soils compost improves water retention because organic content can hold up to 8 times its weight in water to keep it available for the plant longer. Compost also helps soils to resist compaction which helps with water and plant root penetration and allows oxygen in for all life in the soil. It can help reduce lawn stress, act as a buffer to the soils pH by modifying and stabilizing it, add slow release nutrients, and help the plants with the uptake of those nutrients.

Last but not least, compost closes the loop on recycling of organics, conserves water from irrigation practices, and actually filters contaminants from water as it replenishes our water tables and goes into our lakes and rivers. Minnesota diverts about 660,000 tons of organic waste from landfills to create this wonderful compost product that can be used in many applications. Adding organic matter to a lawn by topdressing with compost is probably the most environmentally friendly and beneficial practice in any lawn care program.

How to topdress?

Topdressing can be quite labor intensive and can require shoveling and moving piles of compost or other topdressing materials with wheelbarrows. A smooth, sweeping motion with a shovel aimed at trying to spread the material as evenly as possible to a depth of 1/4 inch to 1/2 inch is the traditional way to do it without machinery. Today new machines are now available to save on much of the manual labor.

Topdressing machines are now an easier option and consist of a hopper to hold the material with a motorized belt and drive system to move the product through the hopper to a spinning disc which spreads it on the lawn as you walk behind it. There are also companies with blower trucks that string out a 4" hose around your yard and blow the product directly out of the truck onto the lawn area.

When topdressing, it is beneficial to do it in conjunction with other practices like aerating or aero-vating, de-thatching and sometimes overseeding. This opens up the soil allowing water, oxygen, and the new microorganisms, bacteria, fungi and organic matter from the compost to come in contact with the existing soils to work their way into the subsoil. When overseeding, compost also helps protect and cover the seed allowing for the most ideal germination conditions and nutrients as the new seedlings establish. To gather more information about the benefits of compost, visit the US or MN Composting Council's websites or the EPA and MN Pollution Control websites.