

STRASSER NOTES

Core Aeration

If your lawn saw some hard traffic this summer — kids playing, family gatherings and the like or maybe you have a lot of clay in your soil — it could be suffering to some degree from soil compaction.

Compaction causes soil to lose its fluffy texture, keeps out air and water and makes it tough for grass roots to grow.

How can you know if your soil is compacted? First take a critical look at the lawn. Does it have places where water runs off instead of soaking in? Is the grass patchy and full of weeds despite your best efforts? If the answer is “yes” to any of these questions, try this test: Take a 6-inch screwdriver and push it into the lawn in several places. Is it difficult to sink it up to the handle with ordinary hand-pressure? If so, this could mean the soil is compacted.

The best way to deal with compacted soil is core aeration — cutting small shafts down into the root zone to fluff the soil and open it to air, water and nutrients.

You can rent a powered aerator at an equipment rental yard, but get one that uses open, core-cutting tines, not solid metal spikes. Spikes crush holes into the soil rather than lift it out, and can often make compaction even worse.

Clear the work area of debris and obstacles — hoses, toys and such — and fire up the engine.

The tines begin to pull the aerator forward only when a safety bar on the handle is pulled. Engage the tines a few times to get the feel of how the machine reacts.

Moist soil responds to the cutters better than dry, but don't try to aerate right after a rain or irrigation.

Working wet soil just makes compaction worse.

Go over the lawn twice, once in one direction and then at 90 degrees to the first run. Stay about a foot away from sidewalks, planters, walls and buildings.

There shouldn't be any danger to irrigation pipes or electric lines; they're usually buried at least 18 inches deep. But mark and steer clear of any sprinkler risers and light fixtures, just to be on the safe side. And give your trees the same wide clearance — stay well beyond the driplines. The aerator tines could pierce and harm large trees' surface roots.

As the core aerator works, it throws little plugs of soil onto the lawn. They may look odd, but leave them there. They'll eventually break down and return soil bacteria and nutrients to the plants.

Not every lawn will need this deep treatment each season. But if yours hasn't been worked in more than three years or if it's been through a summer of high traffic, core aeration can put your soil in top condition for next year. ”