RED HEN TURF FARM
Growing for Others

# How to Calibrate that Darn Fertilizer Spreader

*Updated 02/01/25*

## WHY FERTILIZE (or FEED) YOUR LAWN ?

Fertilizing, mowing, and watering are the fundamental lawn care practices. When you fertilize your lawn, you are feeding it the **nutrients** that it needs to maintain its **density** and **vitality**, enhance its **green** color, and encourage **growth** and **recovery** from turf damage and seasonal turf stresses (such as drought periods).

Unfertilized lawns will gradually lose density, allowing undesirable grassy weeds (like crabgrass) and broadleaf weeds (like dandelion and clover) to encroach. In addition, the risk for soil erosion increases.

Lawns that are properly fertilized and treated for problem weeds and pests can more easily tolerate stresses. Applying the right (quality!) products at the correct time (for your particular lawn) helps turf plants accumulate and store the essential plant foods that are used for growth and development.

## FERTILIZING BASICS

- **Red Turf Farm Hen recommends using a high-quality, properly calibrated Broadcast Spreader or Rotary Spreader rather than a Drop Spreader.**
- **You must calibrate your spreader for each different fertilizer product that you use, because they do not spread the same amount with the same setting! We'll get into this more a bit later on in this handout.**
- Leave grass clippings on for Nitrogen (N) and H20, as long as they do not smother the grass.
- Applying more than 1 pound of actual N per 1000 sq. ft. can burn your lawn.
- For shaded areas, reduce the amount of fertilizer by 1/4 per application.
- Apply fertilizer at half the rate going north and south. Then apply the other half going east and west. Using this pattern to apply fertilizer will help prevent striping.
- Make one pass around the ends of the section you are spreading, and turn off the spreader each time you get to the end.
- NEVER stop walking with the spreader open!! Try to walk at a constant speed.
- Spilled fertilizer can also end up being washed away by rain, ending up in our streams, rivers and lakes and reacting as a harmful pollutant. Always fill your spreader on a solid surface so you can easily sweep up spills. Some states have laws requiring that paved surfaces be swept and cleaned after every fertilizer application. While Indiana does NOT have any such laws, spilled fertilizer can harm your grass.

## SPREADER CALIBRATION—WITHOUT USING MATH!

**FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION: "What setting should I put my spreader on?"** It seems like answering this questions should be simple enough, RIGHT? But … not so much!

- Each Spreader Brand and Model is slightly different from all others.
- That is why Red Hen recommends that you calibrate each spreader separately, even though it may appear identical to another spreader.
- You should also calibrate your spreader for each granular product that you use because products vary in density, size, active ingredient, and nutrient content.

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GUARANTEED TOP QUALITY

- Nowadays, you might get lucky with Googling to find the spreader setting using search terms that include specific spreader make / model and the specific fertilizer product you wish to apply.
- Or … more likely, you won't get lucky. Maybe, you can spend some time reading guides from reputable sources that describe how to use math formulas to get things dialed in extra precise.
- Or maybe … you can try to following method that does not require math, but does require a bit of time, patience, a distance measuring device, and a scale to weigh out some fertilizer.

**STEP 1: Gather up a few things** … You'll need a tape measure / measuring device, a scale to weigh out some fertilizer, and a container to put the fertilizer in while you're weighing it out. Gloves would also be good for safety. Of course, you also need a good quality walk-behind broadcast fertilizer spreader. And the manual to your spreader would come in handy!

**STEP 2: Measure the lawn where you want to start applying fertilizer** … Fertilizer applications are based on a certain number of pounds of fertilizer for every 1000/sq. ft. So, begin by measuring an area of lawn 1000 sq. ft. The area could be 20 ft. X 50 ft. or anything that equals 1000 sq. ft.

**STEP 3: Read your FERTILIZER BAG LABEL to Determine the RATE of Application** … Refer to the fertilizer bag or your customized fertilizer program to see how many pounds of fertilizer to apply per 1000 sq. ft. While you're reading the bag label, be sure to check for any instructions about when the best time to apply the product is, any safety information, etc. ALWAYS READ YOUR LABEL!

**STEP 4: WEIGH out some Fertilizer based on the recommended rate PLUS 1 extra pound** … Let's say that the fertilizer label or your custom fertilizer program says to use 4 pounds of fertilizer for every 1000 sq. ft. For this example, you'd use the scale to weight out 4 pounds PLUS 1 extra Pound, so total of 5 pounds to apply to the 1000 sq. ft. that you measured out in STEP 2 above. The extra pound is that that the fertilizer keeps flowing accurately as you get down near the bottom of your spreader hopper. If your bag label said to use 6 pounds per 1000 sq ft, you'd weight out 1 extra pound, so a total of 7 pounds, etc.

**STEP 5: Put the fertilizer you just weighed out into your spreader hopper, dial into the required setting for the recommended rate of application, and go!** … Place the measured amount into your spreader and begin walking the test area you measured in Step 2. Try to walk at a constant speed (and refer to the "A few more tips" section below). Your spreader instructions may include approximate spreader openings and application amounts. Fertilizer bags also typically list settings for popular spreaders. If none of these apply, choose a setting on your spreader that opens it about 1/4.

⇒ Make your first pass in your measured-out area.
⇒ Make your second pass close enough so you can see a few bits of fertilizer fall on your footprints of your first pass.
⇒ When you've finished spreading the fertilizer over the 1000 sq. ft., weigh out how much you have left.
  ◊ **If you have only the extra 1 lb. left**, CONGRATULATIONS! Your spreader is calibrated accurately.
  ◊ **If you have less than the extra 1 lb. left**, you are using too much and the spreader openings need to be closed more.
  ◊ **If you have more than the extra 1 lb. left**, you are using too little and the spreader openings need to be opened a little more.

**STEP 6: Repeat if needed ….** You may need to repeat the test if it was way off the mark. Don't test over the same area because applying more than 1 pound of actual N per 1000 sq. ft. can burn your lawn!

**A few more tips:**

- Re-calibrate your spreader for each different fertilizer you use, because the size of the granules vary, and different products do not spread the same amount with the same setting!
- Leave grass clippings on for FREE Nitrogen (N) and H20, as long **as they do not smother the grass**.
- **Applying more than 1 pound of actual N per 1000 sq. ft. can burn your lawn.**
- For shaded areas, reduce the amount of fertilizer by 25% per application.
- Apply fertilizer at half the rate going north and south. Then apply the other half going east and west. Using this pattern to apply fertilizer will help prevent striping.
- Make one pass around the ends of the section you are spreading, and turn off the spreader each time you get to the end.
- NEVER stop walking with the spreader open!! Try to walk at a constant speed.
- Some states have laws requiring that paved surfaces be swept and cleaned after every fertilizer application. While Indiana does NOT have any such laws, spilled fertilizer can harm your grass. Spilled fertilizer can also end up being washed away by rain, ending up in our streams, rivers and lakes and reacting as a harmful pollutant. Always fill your spreader on a solid surface so you can easily sweep up spills.