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*Acreage Living is published monthly. Please share it with your acreage neighbors. Call your local ISU Extension Office for more information or contact an ISU Extension staff member listed below to suggest topics for future articles.*

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## Use Garbage Disposals Sparingly

*By Shawn Shouse, ISU Extension Ag Engineering Field Specialist*

As a child, I was always fascinated with garbage disposals. We didn't have one in our home, so I loved to watch them chew up and swallow dinner scraps when I visited friends with these marvels of mechanical wonder. Carrots or celery stalks were a personal favorite to watch as they danced their downward spiral. I wondered, where did all that stuff go? How did this machine work?

If you've never had the nerve to peek inside the disposal with a flashlight, you might wonder too. In essence, the disposal is like a circular food grater with spinning metal hammers to quickly rub the food scraps around the inside of the circular grater. Food particles that are ground fine enough wash through the grater screen and down the drain. Larger chunks stay until they are sufficiently broken and ground. Really hard chunks like bones (or an occasional fork) clatter around making lots of noise. Retrieving those items (ALWAYS unplug the disposal first) will give you a graphic reminder of why fingers NEVER go in a disposal.

Garbage disposals offer convenient processing and disposal of soft food scraps. However, they should be used sparingly in homes with private septic systems. Why? Consider where those food particles go. All this additional organic matter ends up in your septic tank. Given sufficient time and space, the septic tank can decompose those food scraps. But most septic systems are not designed and sized to handle this extra organic load. Particularly in homes already serving large families, this extra load can tax the microorganisms already working to decompose organic matter in your sewage.

Overloaded septic tanks can pass undigested organic matter into the soil absorption field where it plugs the soil pores causing the whole system to fail. Even if the septic tank isn't overloaded to the point of failure, the

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extra organic load will cause faster sludge accumulation in the bottom of the septic tank. You'll be faced with more frequent septic tank maintenance.

Occasional light use of garbage disposals is fine. But for most of

your decomposable table waste and especially for large quantities like food canning or processing waste, consider another great alternative: composting. Compost piles are ideal for decomposing organic wastes like fruit and vegetable scraps, turning them into a valuable product for your garden or yard. Organisms still decompose the food waste, but rather than sludge in your septic tank, the byproduct is the rich humus-like material gardeners crave.

For more information on composting, contact your county extension office or see the February 1999 issue of *Acreage Living* online, [www.extension.iastate.edu/acreage/contents.html](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/acreage/contents.html). For more tips on septic system health and maintenance, see the February-March 2005 issue of *Acreage Living*.

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## Overseeding Lawns

*By Richard Jauron, ISU Extension Horticulture Specialist*

Healthy, well maintained lawns are attractive landscape additions.

Lawns in poor condition, however, are somewhat unsightly. The poor condition of a lawn may be due to poor management, heat, drought, diseases, insects or other factors. In severe cases, the existing lawn may have to be destroyed and a new one established. Lawns that contain more than 50 percent desirable grasses can often be improved by overseeding.

Overseeding is the sowing of grass seed into an existing lawn. In Iowa, the best time to overseed a lawn is late summer (late August to mid-September).

### Site preparation

Good site preparation is necessary for successful overseeding. If possible, identify and correct the problems causing the lawn to decline. Overseeding

may only be a temporary solution if these problems are not corrected.

To reduce the competition from established turfgrass, mow the lawn at a height of 1-1/2 to 2 inches. Successful overseeding also requires good seed-to-soil contact. Simply throwing or broadcasting seed over the lawn typically results in poor seed germination because much of the seed is resting on the thatch layer or soil surface. Rakes, core aerators, vertical mowers and slit seeders can be used to ensure good seed-to-soil contact.

### Overseeding small areas

Small areas can be prepared by gently raking the thin spots. When raking, it's necessary to break the soil surface without pulling out the existing turfgrass. After raking, sow the seed by hand. Then work the seed into the soil by gently



raking the area a second time.

### Overseeding large areas

Large areas can be prepared by using a core aerator. Core aerators are machines with hollow metal tubes or tines. They remove plugs of soil when run over the lawn. To prepare the site, go over the lawn three or four times with the core aerator. When finished, there should be 20 to 40 holes per square foot. Apply the seed with a drop seeder. Afterward, drag the area with a piece of chain link fence or drag mat to break up the soil cores and mix the seed into the soil.

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It's also possible to prepare the site with a vertical mower. When run over the lawn, the knife-like blades of the vertical mower slice through the thatch and penetrate into the upper 1/4 to 1/2 inch of soil. One or two passes should be sufficient. Afterwards, remove any dislodged debris from the lawn. Sow grass seed over the lawn with a drop seeder. Work the seed into the soil by again going over the site with the vertical mower.

Large areas also can be overseeded with a slit seeder. A

slit seeder makes small grooves in the soil and deposits the seed directly into the slits.

Core aerators, vertical mowers and slit seeders can be rented at many garden centers and rental agencies. If you would rather not do the work yourself, many professional lawn care companies can overseed your lawn.

### **Post seeding care**

Keep the seedbed moist with frequent, light applications of water. It's usually necessary to water at least once or twice a day. Continue to mow the lawn at a

height of 1-1/2 to 2 inches. Mow the lawn frequently to reduce competition from the established turfgrass. When the new seedlings reach a height of 1-1/2 to 2 inches, gradually increase the mowing height over the next several weeks. The final mowing height should be 2-1/2 to 3 inches.

Approximately six weeks after germination, fertilize the lawn by applying 1 pound of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. When properly overseeded, a thin, scruffy-looking lawn can be turned into a thick, lush lawn in just a few weeks.



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## **Preserving Your Acreage Bounty – Jams and Jellies**

*By Sam Beattie, ISU Extension Food Safety Specialist and Assistant Professor of Food Science and Human Nutrition*

In the last article we talked about the differences between preserving food products using either a pressure vessel or water bath. The relative acidity of the food is a deciding factor in the choice of which type of vessel to use. Acid foods such as fruits and some pickled products have enough acid to prevent the outgrowth of certain illness-causing bacteria, the most important being botulinum. This article will focus on preservation of fruits by low temperature and pressure canning.

When we think of jams and jellies, we often think of the grape jelly

that accompanied peanut butter for PB and J sandwiches. Jelly, jams and preserves are all made from fresh fruit that has been processed to form a firm gel when cooled. The mechanism for the firm gel involves the plant material pectin, which is the glue that sticks plant cells together. It can be liberated from the plant fruit by extensive boiling of a combination of ripe and unripe fruit. However, not all fruit has enough pectin to form a firm gel nor do very ripe fruits, so we often use commercially available pectin from apples or citrus processing.

Normally pectin requires two important ingredients to set a firm

gel: sugar and acid naturally present in the fruit. Sugar and acid cause the long pectin molecules to come together to form a net that holds the gel. Too little of either will cause the gel to be weak or worse – to not form at all. Commercial pectin comes in several different forms including dry powder and liquid.

Both the acid and sugar content of jellies, jams and preserves are the reasons we can use a low temperature preservation technique such as boiling water baths. Acidified foods such as pickles or fermented products such as sauerkraut also use acid

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as an important preservation component. Recipes that call for a specific type and amount of vinegar must be followed exactly. Furthermore, any other ingredient amount must not be altered according to the recipe.

Vinegar provides enough acid to acidify all ingredients sufficiently to use a water bath processing method. Food such as sauerkraut

and some pickles develop acid as the cabbage or cucumbers ferment. Salt and vinegar that are added at the beginning of the fermentation help beneficial fermentation bacteria get to work and produce more acid. This acid will prevent the growth of botulinum bacteria.

The USDA and others have studied and developed many recipes that are proven to be safe. It is important that you preserve

your bounty using these tested recipes. Some additional resources and recipes can be found at:

The National Center for Home Food Preservation – [www.uga.edu/nchfp](http://www.uga.edu/nchfp); Ball Blue Books – 1994 current year; “So easy to preserve,” Sixth edition, CES, UGA Press. available through Amazon.com.

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## Correction

In the original posting of the August 2008 issue of *Acreage Living*, the phone number for the Families Extension Answerline was incorrectly listed. If you printed or referenced this early posting, please correct the phone number at the end of the last article to 800-262-3804.

Sorry for the inconvenience.

*The Editors*

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## Road Safety Reminder

Harvest season is underway and rural roads will soon be busy with trucks, tractors, wagons and combines. Remember to slow down and be extra alert for these slow moving vehicles. Be cautious at the crest of hills and when visibility is poor. Farm vehicles often make left turns into field or farm driveways without flashing turn signals. Pass with extreme care and watch for possible left turns. With a little extra caution, we can all share the road safely.

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**. . . and justice for all**

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