



Fall Lawn Care

Want a greener and healthier lawn next spring?

A lawn care expert offers tips on what you need to do right now to get your grass in shape.

BY MARY YEE

THE DAYS ARE getting cooler, the nights are getting longer, and another summer is almost history. But don't store the mower and water sprinkler in the shed just yet. While your lawn is preparing now for a winter sleep, the care you give it before and during its dormancy will pay dividends when it reawakens in spring.

Fall lawn care will vary somewhat depending on where you live and what type of grass you have. There are two types of turfgrass, categorized by the climate in which they actively grow: Cool-season and warm-season. The cool-season grasses, such as Kentucky bluegrass, fescue, and bentgrass, are greenest in the cooler weather of spring and fall. These grasses usually sulk in the heat of summer, the time of the year when the warm-season species such as Bermudagrass, St. Augustine, and zoysia hit their stride. But conversely, the warm-season grasses turn completely

brown when the temperature begins to drop. Warm-season lawns, because of their earlier onset of dormancy, don't need a lot of autumn care.

But no matter where you live and what type of grass you have, the grass is alive even when the top growth is dormant, so maintenance doesn't end when the grass stops growing.

TEST THE SOIL

BEFORE DOING anything to your lawn, you should have your soil tested to establish existing levels of nutrients, its pH, and other factors that affect plant growth. The results will determine the type of fertilizer or lawn treatment your grass really needs. The cooperative Extension service of state universities will usually perform soil testing for homeowners for a modest fee. Contact your local service for instructions on how to collect samples and where to send them.

FERTILIZE TO BUILD STRENGTH

ACCORDING TO John Steiner, central regional manager of NaturaLawn of America, a national organic-based lawn care company headquartered in Frederick, Maryland, the average homeowner has many misconceptions about fall lawn care. The most common is: "I don't need to feed my lawn now because I did it in the spring and summer." In fact, says Steiner, "The last application of fertilizer in the fall is *the* most important of the year. You're not feeding the grass for the growth above-ground now—you're building up food reserves so the grass will go into the winter strong and green up faster in the spring." The store of nutrients will also enable the roots of cool-season grasses, which develop in the spring, to get off to a good start.

Above: In autumn, fallen leaves must be removed from the lawn before they form a layer thick enough to smother the grass.

DAVID HATHCOX

But don't use the slow-release fertilizer you did in the spring and summer. "In the fall," says Steiner, "it's important to use a quick-release fertilizer. At this time of the year, the soil is cooler and consequently there's a lower level of microbial activity in the soil to break down the fertilizer to enable plants to take in the nutrients. You want to make the nutrients available to the grass right away."

Steiner recommends a fertilizer that will provide one pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. Quick-release fertilizers are usually applied at higher rates per square foot of lawn than slow-release fertilizers; follow instructions on the product label for proper rates.

When you apply the fertilizer is determined by when the grass goes dormant. Time the application so the grass gets its nutrient boost *just before* it stops growing aboveground. For cool-season grasses in the Mid-Atlantic, that's generally from October to mid-November but may be earlier farther north and as late as December in the south.

WATER FOR WINTER THIRST

NEXT TO NOT fertilizing, the most neglected aspect of fall lawn care is not watering the grass after the end of summer. "Watering is vital in the winter months when there isn't adequate rainfall," emphasizes Steiner. During periods of prolonged winter drought, "if the air temperature is above freezing and the soil isn't frozen," says Steiner, "you should water every two or three weeks for 15 to 20 minutes—just enough to provide moisture to the crown and roots of the plants and



During dry winters, water the lawn every two or three weeks if the ground is not frozen.

MORE FALL LAWN MAINTENANCE

If your lawn has bare patches that need seeding, or you're creating new lawn space, NaturaLawn's John Steiner says autumn is the best time to do both with cool-season grasses. "It's hard to put in new seeds in the spring," he says, "because the soil heats up too fast and even with watering, the roots usually dry up before they get a chance to develop." Warm-season grasses, however, are best sown in late spring or early summer.

Two other important lawn care tasks that should be considered each fall are aeration and overseeding.

Aeration is done by a machine called an aerator that pulls plugs of soil from the lawn, leaving a pattern of holes that permit freer movement of air, nutrients, beneficial microorganisms, and water—as well as creating more growing room—for the grass roots. Die-hard do-it-yourselfers can rent an aerator, but Steiner says, "For the money and time you'd spend renting the machine, transporting it home, doing the work, and transporting it back, you're probably better off having it done professionally."

After a lawn has been aerated is the best time to overseed—broadcast lawn seed into the established lawn to rejuvenate it. Select a grass blend suited to your regional climate and the exposure—sun or shade—of your lawn. A cooperative Extension agent or local botanical garden is a good source of advice for this. —M.Y.



An aerator, like the one shown here, is a hefty piece of equipment that pulls plugs of soil from the lawn.

counteract the drying effects of winter winds." Supplemental watering is usually necessary in all regions of the country where winters are mild, but not so much in areas where there is plenty of winter rainfall or snowcover.

MOW LOWER

MOWING AT THE highest setting on your lawn mower should continue until the grass aboveground enters dormancy in order to preserve as much of the nutrient-producing green blades. Once dormant, the grass no longer needs as much aboveground growth. For the final mowing of the season, lower the cutting height to about two inches for cool-season grasses and one inch for warm-season grasses. Why? "The last thing you want in winter is for the grass to be long enough to lay over on itself under extra wetness or snow," explains Steiner. "This causes mat-

ting and sets up conditions favorable for diseases to develop into the next season."

LAST BUT NOT LEAST...

BE SURE TO remove those leaves from your lawn on a regular basis. A heavy layer of leaves can mat on the lawn, especially when wet, and smother the grass. But once the bulk of the fallen leaves have been raked off and composted, the final scattered leaves can be shredded with a mulching mower. Left on the lawn with the finely chopped grass clippings, the leaves will slowly decompose and add organic matter to the soil.

By following the good fall lawn care practices outlined here, your lawn should be well prepared for winter and reward you with a quick green-up come spring. 🌿

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