

PREPARING YOUR LAWN FOR FALL



Late fall is the best time to prepare your lawn for the coming winter and at the same time give it a great boost for next spring. In northern states, cool-season grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass, fine fescue, perennial ryegrass, tall fescue, buffalograss and creeping bentgrass will be slowing top growth and building internal resources in preparation for winter. In southern states, warm-season turfgrasses such as bermudagrass, zoysiagrass, St. Augustine and centipedegrass will go dormant after the first killing frost.

Clean off any debris: Rake leaves and remove any other debris that can block sunlight and limit photosynthesis.

Get a soil test: Assessing your soil health in the fall gives you time to correct nutrient deficiencies and apply the appropriate fertilizer.

Dethatching: Thatch is an accumulation of undecayed and decaying plant matter at the soil surface that can deny grass roots the air, water, and nutrients they need to thrive. Dethatching will increase organic matter and stimulate the soil microbes that consume thatch.

Aeration: For cool-season grasses, early to mid-fall is a good time to aerate your lawn. The ground is usually soft enough for removing plugs. But avoid aerating when the ground is too soft from rain, which can sometimes result in holes that close-up too quickly for nutrients, water, air and fertilizer to reach the root zone. Although aeration is recommended in spring or fall, the latter may be preferred depending on the climate in your area.

Overseeding: Lawns composed of cool-season grasses can profit from overseeding to fix bare patches and fill in sparse areas. Because aeration creates additional space in the soil and reduces compaction, it is a good

idea to overseed after aerating. Fall is the best time for overseeding these grasses as temperatures are mild, rainfall usually is adequate to help the new seed germinate and grow in, and there is less weed competition than during the spring.

Warm-season turfgrasses can be overseeded with annual ryegrass, a cool-season grass, to provide winter color and an actively growing surface for recreational lawn use. In general, bermudagrass tolerates winter overseeding to a greater degree than zoysiagrass, centipedegrass, or St. Augustinegrass. Your professional regional sod producer, county extension agent, or the turfgrass specialist at your local garden center can recommend a variety of ryegrass seed suited to your region; one that will grow well during the winter and then die back when summer's heat returns, turning over the lawn once again to the warm-season grasses.

Fertilization: Fall is the best time to fertilize cool-season turfgrass so the plants can develop a strong reserve of carbohydrates in their roots. This will aid in spring green-up. Apply fertilizer according to the needs shown by the soil test results. In some regions, a late fall follow-up application also may be needed.

Do not fertilize warm-season turfgrass in the fall. It undergoes a hardening-off process to prepare itself for winter. Fertilization may interfere with that process.

Mowing: Continue to mow grass until it stops actively growing. For the final mowing of the season, cut cool-season grasses to 2.5 inches (6.35 cm). Cut warm-season grasses between 1.5 and 2 inches (3.81 to 5.08 cm), just a little shorter than during spring, summer and early autumn, for the final mowing of the season.

Irrigation: Fall lawn care for cool-season grasses includes ensuring that your lawn receives adequate water to carry it through the winter.



For more information on lawn care and helpful "How to" tips, visit The Lawn Institute at <http://www.TheLawnInstitute.org>.