

Fall care for healthy lawns

Written by Melinda Myers, gardening expert, TV/radio host, author & columnist
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Summer can be hard on our lawns. With much of the country suffering from extreme heat and drought conditions this past summer, many lawns took a beating.

Fall is the perfect time to help your lawn recover from the stressors of summer and prepare for winter. The warm soil and cooler temperatures promote root growth and thickening of the lawn.

Continue to mow the lawn as long as it keeps growing. Mow high to encourage deep roots and leave clippings on the lawn. They add nutrients and organic matter to the soil and do not cause thatch. There's no need to cut the lawn shorter for winter unless you are in an area subject to winter diseases.

Mow don't rake those fall leaves. This will save you time and improve your lawn. The leaves add organic matter and nutrients to the soil. As long as you can see the grass leaves through the shredded leaves your lawn will be fine. Or shred and collect the leaves in your bagger and add them to your compost, dig into annual gardens to improve the soil, or use as mulch around perennials in the garden.

Consider core aeration if your lawn is suffering from compacted soil and thatch. Core aeration machines remove plugs of soil in the lawn, allowing air and water to reach and nourish the grass roots while promoting the breakdown of the thatch. Overseed thin lawns after core aerating. This will enable you to get good seed to soil contact and ultimately enjoy a thicker more lush lawn.

And be sure to fertilize. Fall fertilization helps lawns recover from summer stress, encourages root growth, thickens your grass stand, and prepares the lawn for winter. Use a low nitrogen fertilizer like Milorganite to encourage slow steady growth and prevent damage to already

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stressed lawns. Plus, research has found when microorganisms work on the Milorganite to release the nutrients they also make some of the phosphorous and potassium bound to the soil available to the plants. The phosphorous is good for root growth and potassium boosts hardiness and disease resistance.

Those in the south growing Bermuda, St Augustine and other warm weather grasses can make their last fertilization about one month before the lawn goes dormant. That's about the time of the first killing frost. Fertilizing later can result in winter damage.

Northern gardeners growing cool season grasses like Kentucky bluegrass, fescue and ryegrass should make one application in early fall and their last application sometime between Halloween and Thanksgiving before the ground freezes.

And always sweep any clippings, fertilizer and other debris off walks and drives to prevent them from entering our waterways and eventually our drinking water.

Melinda Myers has over 30 years of experience and has written more than 20 gardening books. Her web site is www.melindamyers.com