

Fall care for a healthier, better looking lawn

By Melinda Myers

As summer fades into fall it is time to help lawns recover from summer stress and prepare for the winter ahead.

Continue to mow your lawn as long as it continues to grow. Grow cool season grasses like bluegrass, fescue and ryegrass 2-1/2 to 3-1/2 inches tall. Warm season grasses like bermudagrass, carpetgrass, centipedegrass and zoysia should be grown at 1 to 2 inches tall while St. Augustine should a bit higher, 2 to 3 inches, for best results. Taller grass is better able to compete with weeds. And there is no need to cut it shorter for the health of your lawn.

Mow often, removing no more than one third the total height. Leave these short clippings on the lawn. They will quickly break down, adding organic matter, moisture and nutrients to the soil.

And as you mow you can take care of all those fall leaves at the same time. Shred the fall leaves and allow them to remain on the lawn. As long as you can see the leaf blades through the shredded leaves your lawn will be fine. And just like the clippings, they add nutrients and organic matter to the soil.



A fall fertilization can help lawns recover from the stresses of summer.
Photo/Mark Avery

Fertilize your lawn with a low nitrogen, slow release fertilizer. University research has shown that fall fertilization is the most beneficial practice for home lawns. Less disease problems and slower weed growth means your lawns – not the weeds and pests – benefit from the nutrients. Fall fertilization also helps lawns recover from the stresses of summer because it encourages deep roots and denser growth that can better compete with weeds and tolerate disease and insects.

Those in colder regions growing cool weather bluegrass, fescue and perennial ryegrass should fertilize around Labor Day and sometime between Halloween and Thanksgiving, but before the ground freezes.

Homeowners in warmer climates growing warm season grasses like centipede, Bermuda and zoysia should fertilize around Labor Day. Apply a low nitrogen slow release fertilizer then and in early October if overseeding the lawn. Make sure the last fall

application is at least one month prior to the average first killing frost. Fertilizing later can result in winter damage.

Weeds often gain a foothold in the lawn during the stressful summer months. A healthy lawn is the best defense. Even with proper care weeds can bully their way into the lawn. Try digging, root and all, to remove small populations of weeds. Weeding can be a great tension reducer and physical workout.

If this isn't possible, consider spot treating weeds or problem areas with a broadleaf weedkiller. Those looking for more organic options may want to try one of the more eco-friendly products with the active ingredient Fehedta or Hedta. Whether using traditional or environmentally-friendly products read and follow label directions carefully. All these products are plant killers and can cause damage to other plants if not applied properly.

Fall, when the lawn is actively growing, is the best time to core aerate or dethatch northern lawns suffering from thatch build up or compacted soil. Thatch is a layer of partially decomposed dead grass plants that prevents water and nutrients from reaching the grass roots. Use a dethatching machine to remove thatch layers greater than one half an inch. Or core aerate the lawn to create openings in the thatch layer and help reduce soil compaction to encourage root growth and allow water and nutrients to infiltrate the soil.

Overseeding your lawn in the fall helps increase thickness and improves the overall health and appearance of the lawn. For best results, overseed directly after aerating.

Begin implementing some of these strategies and soon you'll be on your way to a healthier, better looking lawn for the coming growing season.

Gardening expert Melinda Myers has more than 30 years of horticulture experience and has written more than 20 gardening books, including "Small Space Gardening" and the "Midwest

Gardener's Handbook".