



Kelly Feehan

Extension Educator – Community Environment

2715 13th Street, Columbus, NE 68601

[402-563-4901](tel:402-563-4901)

environment.unl.edu

water.unl.edu/stormwater

platte.unl.edu

Twitter: @KellyFeehan2

Fall Lawn Care to Reduce Winter Issues

By: Kelly Feehan

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Lawns can develop issues over winter. These include snow mold, grass suffocation and winter desiccation. Here are some fall lawn care practices to help reduce these problems.

Snow mold is a minor fungal disease of lawns that can develop under specific fall and winter conditions. With weather extremes increasing, the conditions needed for snow mold could occur more often.

Snow mold is most likely to develop if an early snow falls, and remains, on a lawn that has not gone dormant. Late fertilization, leaving grass too tall going into winter, and allowing tree leaves to build up can also contribute to snow mold.

We can't do much about the weather but we can address the other factors. Avoid fertilizing after October 30. Continue to mow at a two and a half to three and a half inch height until growth stops. Rake and remove leaves as they drop or mulch mow leaves into the turf.

Core aeration or plugging lawns with a history of disease can also reduce fungal infections. Aerifying relieves compaction to improve soil drainage. This encourages healthier plants and faster leaf drying. April and September are the two best months for this practice.

Because snow mold is not a common disease and turfgrass tends to repair itself fairly quickly during spring growth, fungicides are not recommended for home lawns.

To prevent grass suffocation from leaf piles, stay on top of leaf removal with raking or mulch mowing leaves. While many homeowners bag tree leaves each fall, mulch mowing can be easier, less time consuming, and eventually returns organic matter and nutrients to soil.

Some research even suggests mulch mowing helps control weeds. While the weed control benefit is sporadic, mulch mowing improves the health of a lawn and the soil. Know that ground up tree leaves will not add to or create a thatch layer. Thatch is made up of roots and rhizomes, not grass clippings or tree leaves.

When mulch mowing heavy leaf layers, use a double mowing at a slightly higher cutting height to better shred leaves and bury them in the lawn.

If tree leaves pile up quickly and you need to rake and bag them, compost the leaves or take them to yard waste recycling. Don't blow leaves onto the street or other concrete surfaces. Leaves leach nutrients that can be carried to surface water through storm drains leading to excess algae problems.

Winter desiccation or drying of turfgrass will only occur during open winters with little precipitation. In the absence of fall rain, continue to irrigate to avoid drought stress during fall and so the soil is moist when it freezes.

If needed, a light irrigation during winter can be done if temperatures are above 45 degrees Fahrenheit. Water early in the day so the water soaks into the soil before freezing temperatures return overnight.

If perennial broadleaf weeds are still an issue in a lawn, it is not too late to spot treat them with herbicide. These products are often more effective when fall applied. As long as the leaves of weeds are still green they will translocate herbicide into the roots to increase weed kill.

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Flowers whose roots live from year to year are called perennials. How long they actually live depends on the type of perennial, growing conditions, and other factors like disease. Any plant that lives for more than two years is called a perennial. Some might live only a few years, while others survive for many years; such as peony that can hang around for more than 25 years. Common perennials considered to be long-lived are Aster, Baptisia, Bee Balm, Butterfly milkweed, Daylily, hardy geranium, Hosta, Joe-pye weed, Liatris, Purple coneflower, Rudbeckia and sedum. Short-lived perennials may only survive a few years or a little longer. Some include Gaillardia, Columbine, Delphinium, Dianthus, Penstemon, and pincushion flower. To help all perennials live as long as possible, wait until after a hard freeze kills their leaves and stems to cut them back in the fall - or wait until early spring to cut them back.

Snow mold is a minor fungal disease that can develop in lawns under specific fall and winter conditions. With weather extremes increasing, conditions needed for snow mold infection might be more likely to occur. Snow mold is most likely to develop if turfgrass remains taller than three and a half inches going into winter; beneath tree leaf layers; or if an early snow falls, and remains, on a lawn that has not gone dormant. While snow mold is not a common disease, and turfgrass tends to repair itself fairly quick during spring growth; here are some tips for preventing snow mold disease in lawns over winter. Avoid fertilizing after October so final fertilization should be done by October 30. Continue to mow at a two and a half to three and a half inch height until growth stops. Rake and remove heavy leaf layers as leaves drop; and core aerify or plug lawns with a history of disease to improve soil drainage.

While many homeowners bag tree leaves each fall, some professional turf managers mulch mow leaves. Mulch mowing can be easier and over time returns complex organic matter and nutrients to soil. Some research suggests mulch mowing even helps control weeds. While the weed control benefit is sporadic, mulch mowing can improve the health of a lawn and the soil. Mulching leaves is also easier and less time consuming than bagging. If needed, use a double mowing at a slightly higher cutting height to help shred leaves and bury them in the lawn. Know that ground up tree leaves will not add to, or create a thatch layer. If tree leaves pile up too quickly and you need to rake and bag leaves, compost leaves or take them to yard waste recycling. Don't blow leaves onto the street or other concrete surfaces. Leaves leach nutrients that can be carried to surface water through storm drains leading to excess algae problems.

Cool-season vegetables vary in cold tolerance, with some able to take colder temperatures than others. With colder temperatures arriving, know that semi-hardy crops can take a light frost but are damaged by temperatures in the mid- to upper-20s. Examples include beets, Irish potatoes, radish, spinach, Swiss chard and leaf lettuce. Covering these plants when cold weather threatens can help extend the harvest season. Plants termed "hardy" can take even lower temperatures but are damaged when temperatures drop to the low 20s. These include cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, carrots, turnips, and kale. Some root crops can essentially be stored outside even after the leaves have been damaged or killed by frost. Beets, carrots, Irish potatoes and turnips can be mulched and harvested as needed until the soil starts to freeze in November to December. (Source: Ward Upham, Kansas State)

It's time to think about digging and storing bulbs that will not survive our winters; such as gladioli, caladium, dahlia, and tuberous begonia. All of these need to be dug just after frost has browned their foliage. After digging, let them dry for one week in a shady, well-ventilated area like a garage or shed; avoiding exposure to

freezing temperatures. Next, remove excess soil from the underground plant structures and pack them in peat moss, vermiculite, or perlite. Don't allow bulbs to touch. If one decays, the rot will spread. Dusting them with fungicide before storing helps prevent rotting. Store Caladium between 50 and 60 degrees F. Store the others as close to 40 degrees F as possible. Finding a decent spot to store bulbs may be difficult. Some gardeners place them against a basement wall farthest from the furnace and insulate them so the wall keeps them cool. (Ward Upham, Kansas State).