

Yard and Garden Article for 11-11-2017- by Ted Griess – Horticulture Extension Assistant

Before the soil freezes and the lawn turns brown, many turf chores can and should be accomplished to better prepare the lawn for its long winter's nap.

Fallen leaves are a perfect source of raw material for the compost pile, but if allowed to remain on the lawn over the winter, they can easily contribute to turf problems next spring. Accumulated wet leaves easily mat down, preventing the sunlight from reaching the grass blades. When this condition exists, grass weakens, is prone to disease, and often winterkills.

Avoid leaving the turfgrass too high for the winter. Similar to matted leaves, matted grass increases the potential for fungal diseases. When snow covers turf for a length of time, and if there is an excess of organic debris beneath the snow, a fungal disease called snow mold can easily develop. It does not harm the grass to mow it when it is cold; however, avoid mowing when the grass is wet or frozen, and only mow 1/3 of the grass blade per mowing. Mow the lawn to a length of about one inch and a half. This final mowing not only removes the excess grass but is also a quick way to pick up the remainder of fallen leaves. Place the clippings on the compost pile or cultivate them into the soil of the vegetable garden.

If the soil is not frozen and if the turf has not turned brown, one can still apply a winterizer fertilizer. Generally, cool weather grasses such as bluegrass and fescue can be fertilized until the middle of November without problems. Little growth activity takes place above the soil at this time of year; however, the root system continues growing until the soil freezes. A well-established root system is the basis for a successful lawn. If Mother Nature does not provide the moisture, thoroughly water in the fertilizer with a supplemental watering.

Remember to disconnect all hoses from outdoor hydrants. If left connected and subjected to freezing temperatures, damage can easily result. Follow the instructions for winterizing your automatic irrigation system.

Prepare the mower for winter storage. Gasoline left in the tank over the winter months often breaks down and becomes gummy. This contaminated fuel can create serious problems with the mower's carburation system. Either drain the gas tank for the winter, or simply operate the mower until it runs out of gas. This is also an opportune time to get a jump on next spring. Take time to drain and change the oil. Clean the deck and underside of the mower, and while working on the underside, remove the blade and sharpen it. Keep in mind for one's safety; always disconnect the spark plug before working on the underside of a mower.

Consider storing patio and lawn furniture. Leaving items such as picnic tables and grills on the lawn over the winter months can also create dead spots in the grass.

While busily completing these final chores on the lawn, take a moment to examine shrubs and trees. Winterizing trees and larger shrubs can best be accomplished by a good watering. Winter damage to shrubs and trees is usually a result of their inability to pull water from frozen soil. Following leaf drop and before the soil freezes, a deep, thorough watering is the best treatment.

Having accomplished all these last minute chores, one should now feel confident that the lawn is ready for its long winter's nap.