

Fall Lawn Care to Reduce Winter Issues

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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.