

LATE FALL LAWN CARE TIPS

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Release: Week of November 2, 2020

November has arrived and that means it's time to stop fertilizing lawns but continue to rake or mulch mow leaves into the turf. If you have bare or thin areas of turf, wait until at least late November to dormant seed instead of seeding next spring. And avoid walking on frosted turf.

Lawns should not be fertilized after late October. At one time, it was recommended to time the final fertilization with the last mowing of the season, which often was in early November.

However, new research shows nitrogen uptake is much lower in late fall compared to early fall. This is because reduced water use by the grass slows nitrogen movement to turf roots, and cooler soils reduce nitrogen uptake.

As a result, nitrogen is lost through processes such as leaching, especially in sandier soils during high precipitation winters.

Nitrogen may also sit in the soil all winter. If that happens, late fall fertilization causes excessive early spring growth of turfgrass. This increases mowing requirements and can deplete carbohydrate stores in grass plants prior to summer, stressing the lawn and leading to issues like diseases or insects.

As tree leaves fall onto lawns, homeowners tend to bag fallen leaves before mowing. However, many professional turf managers mulch mow leaves in place of bagging.

Mulch mowing can be easier and returns organic matter and nutrients to soil. Some research suggests mulch mowing may even control some weeds. While the weed control benefit is sporadic, mulch mowing does improve turf and soil health to help lawns better compete with weeds.

Mulching leaves is easier and less time consuming than bagging. A double mowing at a slightly higher cutting height might be needed to shred fallen leaves and bury them in the grass. Ground up tree leaves do not cause thatch so this is not a concern.

If tree leaves pile up too deeply, rake and bag leaves for yard waste recycling. Don't blow tree leaves onto the street. They leach nutrients or are carried to surface water via storm drains, leading to algal problems in water bodies.

If there are thin or bare areas in a lawn and you ran out of time to seed these areas in early September, which is the ideal time to seed, consider dormant seeding rather than waiting until spring.

With dormant seeding, the area is still prepared from late September into November, but the seed is not broadcast until after the growing season has ended. If dormant seeding, plan to spread quality seed anytime from late November through March. The idea is to have the seed in place so it begins growth as soon as possible in spring.

Frosty mornings have arrived. If you've walked across a frosted lawn, you may have noticed your footprints showing up later in the day. The damage is believed to be caused by ice crystals killing plant cells when they're forced into the leaf by the weight of a wheel or foot.

When walking on a frosted lawn, grass blades are damaged but the crown, or growing point of the plant, is not. Turfgrass that is still growing usually recovers after a couple of mowings.

If the damage occurs after the grass slows or stops growth, the damage may remain until it's masked by the lawn going dormant and turning brown or until after spring growth begins. When possible, avoid walking or driving on frosted turf to help avoid damage.