

Warm Weather and Landscape Care
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Extension has had more than the average number of questions this year about how late lawns can be fertilized. Most likely this was due to above average temperatures in November and early December.

Since I was asked this question again last week, know that no matter how warm temperatures are, tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass lawns, as well as other turfgrass species, should not be fertilized after October.

Turfgrass is dormant and not actively growing so nutrients will not be taken up and used by plants. Instead, they can leach out of the soil or run off of lawns and contribute to nutrient pollution of water.

If nutrients are not lost over winter, they can cause a growth surge too early next spring when soil temperatures are cold. This weakens root systems and sets turfgrass up for issues such as disease or insect damage.

Only fertilize actively growing lawns. For tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass, the fertilization period in Nebraska is April into late October. Turf fertilization should not be done from November through March.

When fertilizing, sweep granules off of sidewalks and driveways into a dust pan and place them in the middle of the lawn. This prevents them from being carried to surface water in stormwater runoff draining into storm drains.

Don't overlook mowing tree leaves into the turf or raking and recycling leaves from lawns before snow causes them to mat down. Matted leaves suffocate turf and increase the risk of snow mold disease.

Recycling tree leaves reduces the amount that blows onto streets where they can be carried into storm drains and directly to streams, rivers and lakes. Once in water, tree leaves decompose and release nutrients, also contributing to water pollution.

Recycle tree leaves by taking them to yard waste recycling or bagging and saving them for later use as a carbon source in home composting. During summer, grass clippings (a nitrogen source) are the main plant waste available; however both carbon and nitrogen plant sources are needed for successful composting.

It is fine to just leave tree leaves that have blown into flower beds and shrub borders where the plants will help hold them in place. Here they serve as protection for plants as well as overwintering pollinators. Rake and recycle them next spring if they become piled too deeply over plants.

Tree leaves can be used to mulch tender plants over winter. Now that temperatures have finally become more winter-like, it is time to mulch tender plants if they haven't been already.

In Nebraska, strawberries, chrysanthemums and some roses are the most common plants in need of winter protection. But plants only hardy to zone 5 or zone 6 will benefit from winter mulch.

For hybrid tea, floribunda or other tender roses, first cover the base of the stems with several inches of soil or compost. Bring in soil rather than digging it from around the plant or plant roots will be damaged.

To protect tender plants and help keep mulch, place a chicken wire cage around plants to be protected and secure it, then fill it with at least a two foot deep layer of coarse leaves, wood chips or straw to protect plants over winter.

For roses, avoid pruning at this time even if some of the canes are sticking out of the mulch. Fall or winter pruning can lead to increased winter damage. Wait until mid-April and then prune out any winter killed wood.