

# Fall Lawn Care Guide

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Fall is the ideal time to work on the lawn. Most cool-season grasses (Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, tall fescue and fine fescues) thrive from September through May. Roots continue to grow even though top growth looks minimal. Everything done to the turf during the fall has a direct bearing on the lawn's appearance next summer.

Ideally, our lawn care calendar should be from September 1 through August 31, and *not* April 1 through March 31. This schedule would encourage 9 months of cool-season growth before summer's conditions. Thinking that lawn care starts in the spring only allows a couple months of growth before demanding environmental conditions set in.

## FERTILIZING

**September** — Early September fertilizer applications are the first step. Nitrogen will stimulate shoot growth when temperatures are still warm to promote top growth. Apply about 1 pound of actual nitrogen per 1000 square feet. In most cases, you can follow the label on the lawn fertilizer bag; most are formulated to apply 1 pound of actual nitrogen per 1000 square feet.

There is no easy method to calibrating fertilizer spreaders. The best bet is to measure the lawn and determine square feet. Then, set the fertilizer spreader so it takes several passes to apply all the fertilizer for that area. For example, if the fertilizer bag says it will cover 10,000 square feet and you have 5,000 square feet, you'll need half a bag. Set the fertilizer spreader on the lowest possible setting (smallest opening) and continue to apply the fertilizer over the required area.

Apply the fertilizer in a north-south direction, and then in an east-west direction. If some remains, continue to apply in diagonals or a circular fashion. The goal is to avoid streaks as well as apply the fertilizer uniformly over the entire area.

If you intend to seed in the fall, apply fertilizer at half the recommended rate and incorporate the food into the soil before seeding.

You may have to refill the spreader a couple of times if you are fertilizing an area larger than the area listed on the fertilizer bag. Avoid filling the spreader in the yard because spills and leaks can cause serious turf burning.

Check the spreader before filling to make sure each of the drop holes is unclogged. Clogged holes can create an uneven fertilizer pattern. Carefully remove offending particles. Don't try jamming with a screwdriver or punch; you may end up making the hole larger and affecting the drop pattern.

September fertilizers can be of a higher nitrogen percent. Nitrogen is the first number in the analysis and refers to the percent nitrogen in the bag. For example, a bag of 10-10-10 fertilizer contains 10 percent nitrogen. In September, the nitrogen percent can be as high as 33, though most formulations will be in the 20s. It is crucial with any high fertilizer application to apply sufficient water to avoid burning the grass. Hopefully, fall rains will occur. If they don't, you'll have to water the lawn at least an inch or two per week until the weather cools in October.

**Winterizer** — Simply put, this may be the most important fertilizer you apply to your lawn. Winterizers don't provide immediate results. Their benefit is what they do to the root system throughout the winter months and the effect on shoot development next spring.

The best winterizers are slow-release fertilizers. The chemicals break down slowly over the later fall, winter and spring. During this time, the roots (which are actively growing as long as the ground isn't frozen) are absorbing and storing the nutrients for later growth. When air temperatures finally warm in

the spring, the stored nutrients are immediately available and the turf is green and thick, usually by mid-March. A thick stand also means less reliance on crabgrass preventers since crabgrass problems are minimized due to a lush turf.

Winterizers are put on after the last mowing of the year. Since that's difficult to predict, a better method would be to apply the winterizer to the turfgrass on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Most applications are based on applying 1 pound of actual nitrogen per 1000 square feet. Like straight lawn fertilizers, most winterizers are formulated for this rate. Read and follow the directions on the label.

## MOWING

As soon as the grass needs cutting, mow it. Don't wait. Most cool-season grasses should be cut at a 2- to 2½-inch height. This means mowing the lawn when it reaches 3 to 4 inches to avoid cutting off more than leaves. If you allow the grass to get tall before mowing, you run the risks of stressing the plants and encouraging diseases.

**Sharpen your mower blades.** Sharp blades are essential. A sharp blade makes a clean cut. Blades should be sharpened at least twice a year—April 1 and September 1. If you use the mower to mulch leaves, sharpen three times a year—once in the spring, around September 1, and another sharpening in mid- to late October.

## SEEDING

Seeding should occur as soon as possible after September 1. Ideally, bluegrass seed needs two months of good growing to mature. Seeding success after the middle of the month isn't guaranteed. In order for seed to germinate, moisture is needed

continually. Do not allow the seed to dry out; this may mean daily or twice-daily waterings. Seed should also have good contact with the soil. After seeding, rake the seed in to get soil contact. An empty roller can also be used.



Fall is the ideal time to seed a lawn. Spring seeding is best used as a way to fill in bare patches in the sod or to seed an entire lawn due to construction.

Overseeding to thicken a turf should also be done in September. Overseed at the rate of 1 pound of bluegrass seed per 1000 square feet. A slit seeder is ideal; seeding and raking is a good second choice.

Choose the correct seed type for your situation. A "blend" of different cultivars or horticulture varieties of the same grass, such as three or four different types of Kentucky bluegrass, will increase the disease resistance of the lawn. A "mixture" of seed, such as bluegrass and the quick-germinating perennial ryegrass, may help in getting a lawn established quicker.

Make sure you work the soil to a depth of 6 to 8 inches before seeding. Add 4 to 6 inches of compost or other organic matter.

## SODDING

Sodding can occur any time the ground isn't frozen. Sodding requires the same type of soil preparation as seeding, as well as frequent waterings to keep the roots from drying until they get established.

Like seeding, sod should be mowed when it needs to be mowed. While you want to avoid heavy activity on sod until it does become established, mowing will not hurt it.

Sod is an ideal means of filling in patches without ripping up the entire lawn. Make sure you cut out the area so the sod fits snugly.

## WEED CONTROL

Fall is a satisfactory time to control some broadleaf weeds. Chemical treatments on dandelions, plantain and ground ivy tend to be more successful around the first of September. Weeds are storing food in their roots; herbicides are transported down to the roots with the food, resulting in a high mortality rate. While damage to trees and shrubs is possible, damage usually isn't as serious.

**Make sure you read and follow all directions on the chemical label.**

## AERATION

Next to the winterizer fertilizer, aeration may be the best process for your turf in the fall. Loosening the soil allows better root growth which means better shoot growth. Aeration is the process of increasing the soil's air content. An ideal soil will contain 50 percent spaces. Half of those spaces or 25 percent of the total soil structure will be for air.

A core aerator will pull 1- to 2-inch plugs of soil from the ground. Holes are usually pulled every 3 to 4 inches in the lawn. Plugs are deposited on the soil's surface where they will break down. Often, the lawn is mowed the following day, shattering the plugs after they've dried. Soil surrounding the plugged holes and the soil deposited on top will collapse and fill in.

Turf soil should be aerated at least once a year on heavy compacted or clay soils. At a minimum recommended rate, turf should be aerated at least once every 3 to 5 years.

Grass should be growing before core aeration takes place. September 1 is the ideal time to aerate. On heavily compacted or clay soils, a second aeration around April 1 is recommended. Soil conditions should be moist but not soggy. Aerifiers will not penetrate dry soil.

**Do NOT use any aerifying equipment that simply punches a hole in the soil.** While a hole may be created, the "punched" soil merely compacts in the surrounding area. Also avoid using golf or football cleats, or shoes and sandals with nails pounded through the soles. These are not effective aerifying devices.

## DETHATCHING

A thatch layer greater than 1 inch can result in serious disease and stress problems. Remove ½ inch of thatch using a dethatcher, power rake or vertical mower. Dethatching should be done around September 1 as the grass starts to actively grow again after remaining dormant during the summer.

Do not remove more than ½ inch. Grass roots and plants will likely be removed, and your turf will be thinned. Dethatching can also occur April 1, and you can remove another ½ inch. (Aerate **after** dethatching if both processes will take place.)

Too much thatch signals another problem such as too much water, too much fertilizer, poor mowing habits, or an over-reliance on chemicals.

## QUICK GUIDE TO FALL LAWN CARE

Task	Best Time
Mowing	When the lawn needs it – when grass reaches 3 to 4 inches
Fertilizing	Apply a nitrogen fertilizer in September Apply a winterizer the Saturday before Thanksgiving
Seeding	Early September
Sodding	Any time the ground is not frozen
Aerating	Around September 1 A second time around April 1 on heavily compacted or clay soils
Dethatching	Around September 1, and again around April 1
Weed Control	Around September 1 for some broadleaf weeds

