

Lawn Management in the Fall

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Although we often think of spring time as the season to do yard work, it is autumn that is really an excellent time to do many of the tasks to keep your lawn in good shape – dense, green and alive. Cool season grasses love the autumn weather and will continue to grow well into late October or early November. So, September and early October is a nice period to take care of many tasks:

Mowing – While it is good to mow high (3 to 4 inches) in spring and summer, as the fall months continue it is good to gradually reduce the mowing height such that the last mowing is about 2 to 2 ½ inches. Sometimes, if the grass is left too high there are more opportunities for winter and early spring diseases to proliferate. Also, high grass in the winter helps to harbor field mice and other rodents.

Fertilization and Liming – Early autumn is a good time to replenish your soil. It is best to base your fertilizer needs on a soil test, which will provide information on any liming or nutrient needs. Generally, you want to keep nitrogen applications to a minimum in the fall, so use a turf fertilizer that is formulated for fall applications. Remember that Vermont laws do not allow you to add any phosphorus (P) fertilizer to your lawn unless your soil test shows that it is needed. If your soil test calls for phosphorus (P), then use a formula that includes it. However, if your soil is sufficient for P, use a fertilizer formula that has no P (it will have a zero in the middle number of the formula). There are both organic and non-organic fertilizer formulas that can meet your needs. High quality compost spread thinly (no more than a ¼ inch) over your lawn, is another good source of nutrients (and organic matter). Some composts can be high in P so avoid applying more than ¼ inch on established turf. **AVOID** fertilizing your lawn when the ground is frozen. That promotes runoff.

Fall is a good time to add lime if your soil test indicates a need. If your soil needs magnesium, than use a dolomitic limestone. However, if Mg is adequate just use a calcitic limestone.

Aeration – Fall is a good time to aerate the soil for compaction management. You want to do this by at least mid-October so that the lawn has time to recuperate and fill back in. You can often rent aerators from local hardware stores or garden centers. A way to reduce the rental cost is to go in with several neighbors for a day's rental. **ONLY USE** hollow tine aerators so that cores are pulled out of the soil profile. These little holes are then filled back in with broken up, loose soil. Solid tines are not recommended. They can actually create more compaction unless they have a vibrating, shattering mechanism. Before running the

machine, make sure all the tines are free of soil. Sometimes, a previous user will run the machine in really wet soil that upon drying becomes crusted or hardened in the corer. If that is the case, you will want to dig the hard soil out before using. Also, your soil needs to be adequately moist for best aerator penetration. Once you've aerated, it is good to over seed the area with a desired grass mix.

Dethatching – Fall is a good time to dethatch your lawn if needed. Thatch is the dead zone between the leaves and the soil caused by the buildup of dying tissue, particularly lateral stems such as rhizomes and stolons. Most all grasses have some thatch and about a ½ inch is good for the turf and provides some cushion as you walk on the grass. However, thatch layers over an inch thick can cause many problems in your turf. It can harbor root feeding insects, increases the incidence of disease, and makes watering very difficult. When wet, thatch is very soggy but when dry, it repels water. So, dig down with a trowel and see how thick your thatch is. If it looks like a problem, consider dethatching. Otherwise, annual aeration is one way to help prevent the buildup of thatch.

Overseeding – Fall is a great time to overseed thin areas of the lawn. Try to match the seed mixture with what you have in your lawn. Most lawns have a mixture of Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass and fine fescue. Before overseeding, it is best to scratch the soil surface with a rake or dethatcher to assure good soil contact with the new seed. Once you've applied the seed, topdress the area with a thin layer of compost or topsoil and then water adequately until the grasses germinate and begin growing. Just continue to mow the existing grasses as usual.

Compost Tea – There are many advocates for applying compost tea to your lawn and autumn is a good time.