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## Fall Lawn Care

Though the radiance which was once so bright be now forever taken from my sight. Though nothing can bring back the hour of splendor in the grass, glory in the flower. We will grieve not, rather find strength in what remains behind. William Wordsworth

We will grieve not because we're going to take proper care of our grass and the fall is a good time to do it. We have some of the best conditions in the country to grow grass, especially Kentucky blue grass. Our climate tends to be cool and usually we have enough rainfall during the growing season. There is no excuse for not having a luxuriant yard. However, looking at my yard I will fall back on an old adage, "Do as I say, not as I do."

Helen Keller, blind since birth, once said this about grass, "To me a lush carpet of pine needles or spongy grass is more welcome than the most luxurious Persian rug."

I am envious of some friend's yards. Beautiful, lush, green grass that feels like the softest, aromatic carpet. How do you do this? What is the magic formula? No magic formula, knack, or aptitude. Just a few basic tasks that should be performed in the fall, a time of the year when most of us forget all about the yard and think about heading south, duck hunting, football, and Halloween.

If jobs around the yard in the fall seem like drudgery to you, perk up and look at them as exercise that's beneficial to your health and well-being. How many times have we looked up at a passing flock of geese, listened to nuthatches and chickadees "chipping" in the woods or by the bird feeders, or thrilled to the loons' last call. All these happen when we're in the yard preparing for next year. It never gets old.

Perhaps the most important job in the fall is to fertilize the grass. Information sources don't agree on timing but my experience as the best time to apply the final application of fertilizer in northern Minnesota is September to early October. This gives grass a chance to grow and absorb nutrients that are stored until needed for spring growth. Lawns that have received late season fertilizer are often the first to begin growing in the spring. "Winterizing" types of fertilizers containing high amounts of phosphorous are only necessary if a reliable soil test indicates a shortage of phosphorous. It is a violation of Minnesota state law to apply fertilizers containing phosphorous unless a soil test indicates there is a need for the nutrient or you are establishing a new lawn.

Bloomers carry "ferti-lome Winterizer" fertilizer, an ideal fertilizer for fall application.

Mow the grass a little lower than you did during the summer. Lower the mower from 3 to 2 1/2 or 2 inches. The reasoning behind this is if grass is longer than 3 inches it will mat, leading to winter lawn disease problems such as snow mold. BUT, if lower than 2 inches, the grasses ability to make and store food for growth in the spring will be severely limited.

Raking leaves. A boring, repetitive chore but the benefits are both physical and horticultural. Raking removes excess organic debris and helps to maintain water quality. In winter, freezing and thawing can cause leaves, dead grass, and other organic debris to release soluble forms of phosphate and nitrates. If these chemicals run off frozen ground during spring snow melt and early spring rains, they can end up in surface water. Keep grass clippings, leaf litter, and other organic debris off driveways, sidewalks and streets.

Recycle leaves by composting. You can also use whole leaves, or chipped by a power mower, as winter mulch around landscape plants. If leaves are left on the yard, make several passes over them with a power mower, chopping them into a thin layer fine enough to stay on the lawn without causing damage while providing nutrients for the grass. The last option is, of course, to bag them and hope someone picks them up or take them to the municipal recycling place where they are turned into compost.

Since lawn grasses continue to grow throughout the fall, watering is still important to sustain growth. However, as days get shorter, temperatures become cooler, and rainfall occurs on a somewhat regular basis, the need for additional watering usually diminishes during the fall period. An inch of water once a week in the summer may be sufficient for two or three weeks. Water as needed until the ground is cold and beginning to freeze.

Fall is a good time to control perennial broadleaf weeds such as dandelions, plantain, clover, and creeping Charlie. Spot treating them with herbicide is usually sufficient and herbicides sold in ready-to-use spray containers make spot treatment easy. The herbicide is drawn into the roots of plants that are still actively growing, thus killing the entire plant. However, use herbicides when the temperatures are at least 50 degrees or higher. The best herbicide control occurs between 50 to 80 degrees. Herbicides need time to be effective before the weather becomes too cold. However, herbicides do not need to be applied over the entire lawn unless there's extensive weed infestation and crabgrass is not controlled in the fall. Crabgrass control should be done in the spring because the plant will grow from seeds produced the previous season.

If your lawn has compaction problems, the time around Labor Day and through early fall is an excellent time to do core aeration. A core aerifier pulls cores out of the soil and re-deposits them on the lawn surface. The aeration of the soil will encourage more active root and microbial growth. The cores can be left on the surface to naturally decompose. Aeration also helps to control thatch buildup. It's best to go over the ground for two or three passes to increase the number of holes needed to maximize the benefit.

Finally, fall is the best time to seed or re-sod your lawn because the cool temperatures are more suitable for grass growth and less stressful on new plants. If the lawn suffered injury during dry conditions in late summer the middle of August until the middle of September is a good time to sow grass seed. Lightly work the seed into the soil and keep the area uniformly damp, not soggy, until seeds start to germinate and emerge. As plants get taller and more established, watering can be done less frequently. But be sure to complete sodding before very cold weather sets in.

Be sure to stop by Bloomers soon to purchase your fall fertilizer, "ferti-lome Winterizer"

Remember, there is not one blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice. – John Calvin