



Late Summer Lawn Care Tips

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

In a more typical summer, lawns would be looking rather stressed right now but because of all the rain, we've had, more people are complaining about how often they need to mow rather than how bad their lawns look. Just because there has been little need to irrigate this summer does not mean that lawns will not look even better with some care.

Some lawns have patches of dead grass probably due to disease problems that were fostered by the high humidity and rains. Areas of dead grass should be raked up and reseeded in the next few weeks. Late summer through early fall is a great time to reseed any bare spots. If just left bare, weeds will inevitably move in.

Cool season turf grass selections for most New England lawns include Kentucky bluegrass, fescues and rye grasses. A mixture of all three works well for sunny areas while fescues would be a better choice for partly shaded areas. Although fescues tolerate a fair amount of shade, they do require a minimum of 4 hours of direct sunlight each day to maintain themselves.



Seeding bare areas. Photo by dmp, 2019

Seeds require contact on bare mineral soil to germinate. Scratch up bare areas, scatter seed and keep the top half inch of soil moist so seeds can germinate. Do not overwater. Sometimes a mulch comes with the seed or a light straw mulch can be used to keep moisture in. Rye grasses germinate in 7 days, fescues in 14 and bluegrass in 21.

One of the most important activities a homeowner can do for their lawn this fall is fertilize. The summer rains have likely leached out many plant nutrients so now is the time to replenish them. Lawn fertilizers sold in Connecticut are phosphorus-free because of a law passed in 2013 prohibiting the application of phosphorus (our number one fresh water pollutant) on established lawns unless a fertilizer recommendation is listed on a recent soil test result.

When shopping for lawn fertilizers, one will typically see the 3 numbers that represent the guaranteed analysis, such as 27 – 0 – 3, with the zero representing the amount of phosphorus in that package of fertilizer. However, lawn starter fertilizers do contain small amounts of phosphorus because this aids in root establishment. Apply the fertilizer as directed on the bag or follow the recommendations on a soil test report.

Speaking of which, fall is a great time to soil test. A standard nutrient analysis offered by the UConn Soil Nutrient Analysis Lab (www.soiltest.uconn.edu) will provide pH and nutrient levels as well as recommendations for limestone and fertilizer applications, if necessary. Soils with a pH in the mid 6s, are most suitable for good turf growth.

According to John Inguagiato, UConn Associate Professor of Turfgrass Pathology, now is also a good time to control broad-leaved weeds. Small patches can be hand weeded or spot sprayed. If prevalent throughout the lawn, consider using a chemical control.

Dr. Inguagiato also stressed the importance of regular mowings throughout the fall. Always make sure your lawn mower blades are sharp. Dull blades will rip the grass and can contribute to disease problems.

Ideally grass should be mowed at a 2 to 3-inch height. This aids in weed control as the taller blades of grass will shade out many weed species, like crabgrass. Leave clippings on the grass as nutrients will be recycled and the soil organic matter will be increased over time. In fact, research at the University of Connecticut has show that the nutrients returned to the soil by leaving the clippings in place are equivalent to one fertilizer application each year. This practice saves you time and money and is beneficial to the lawn as well.

Lastly, Dr. Inguagiato advises that fall leaves and debris should not be left on lawns over the winter. Not only can the grass be smothered, but the combination of long blades of grass covered with leaves creates perfect conditions for snow mold come spring.

Beautiful lawns do take a bit of effort. The rains have left our lawns in better conditions than in most years so now it is our turn to keep them that way with proper late summer care.

If you have questions about lawn care or on any other home or garden topic, feel free to call the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at 877.486.6271, visit their web site at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.