



But Don't Stop:

Mowing. As a rule, if grass is mowed too short, there will not be enough green blade for photosynthesis (food production), so the plant steals nutrient reserves from its roots to send up new shoots and continue growing. Never remove more than a third of the grass length at a time.

Watering. Telltale signs that the lawn is thirsty in a dry autumn are footprints that don't disappear within an hour. Central Virginia fescue lawns need 1 inch of water per week, best applied in two deep irrigation sessions rather than all at once. A healthy Kentucky bluegrass or ryegrass lawn in Boulder, Colorado, may need up to 2¼ inches of water per week under hot, dry, windy conditions, while a buffalograss lawn can go for weeks without water during summer and fall.

ORGANIC SOLUTIONS

Fall for the Lawn

BY SUMMER'S END, YOUR GRASS HAS ENDURED HEAT, FEET, AND A HAIRCUT A WEEK. NOW IT'S TIME TO GIVE YOUR POOR, TIRED TURF A PICK-ME-UP.

The lawn in late summer is like a marathoner at the end of those 26.2 miles: hot, tired, and really thirsty. It needs some serious recuperation to be at the top of its game next year. Help get it there via the soil.

“Correcting soil is the key to growing a sustainable lawn that doesn't need constant chemical inputs,” says Susan Edwards, M.S., Master Gardener coordinator for the Cooperative Extension in Chesterfield County, Virginia.

But first, a soil test. In August, analyze the soil for pH and nutrient levels, as well as organic-matter content. That way, the results will be in hand when it's time to apply fertilizer in September.

Autumn is the best time to seed a new lawn, because the grass has three seasons to develop a strong and supportive root system before

summer arrives. Whether planting a new lawn, or reinvigorating an existing one, the plan is the same.

Add compost. Organic matter decreases compaction, increases biological activity, adds nutrients, and enhances the water-holding capacity of the soil.

Put down ½ inch of compost on the entire lawn.

Rake it flat and then core-aerate to incorporate the compost into the soil. When seeding a new lawn, spread 2 to 3 inches of compost in fall and till it in.

Time to fertilize. Without sufficient nitrogen, grass weakens and weeds move in. When and how much to fertilize depends on the grass type, growing zone, and maintenance practices. The general rule: Fertilize when the grass is active and can store carbohydrates and develop roots. “Nitrogen application is standard, and a soil test provides recommendations for phosphorus or potassium if soil is deficient,” says Edwards. Reduce nitrogen application by up to one-third by returning grass clippings to the lawn during mowing.

Adjust the pH. Most grasses prefer a soil pH between 6.2 and 6.5. To raise the pH, add lime; both pelletized and ground limestone work. Soil test results provide recommendations for your soil type in pounds per thousand square feet. Apply no more than 50 pounds of lime per 1,000 square feet at a time. If a soil test recommends more, divide the amount into 50-pound increments, each separated by about 3 months. —*Pamela Emanoil Bond*

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