



## Fall Turf Care

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I'm sure many of you are "garden weary"  
a term I coined to describe how most

gardeners feel at this time of year.

With all the activities associated with fall and season-end chores to do, gardeners tend to neglect the lawn. There are some guidelines to consider when preparing lawns for winter that can help keep problems to a minimum.

Crabgrass, a warm-season annual, dies off in early fall, leaving brown areas in the lawn. Different cultivars of desirable lawn grasses, such as San Augustine, may vary in how fast they go dormant, which can add to the mottled appearance of lawns this time of year.

You must continue to cut your grass until there has been no visible growth for about two weeks. I know it's time to quit mowing when I have no more clippings to remove. Leave grass at least two inches high, but no more than three inches for winter. This height is optimum for several reasons. Grass cut too short is vulnerable to drying winter winds and, believe it or not, sun. Since we don't have a protecting snow cover, winter sun can be damaging to the grass. Two inches protects the crown, which is the white area visible at ground level that also extends into the root zone.

If you have a lot of thatch buildup in the turf, fall is an excellent time to remove it. Power rakes are available at most rental store. I like to get two or three neighbors to "chip in" on the rental. Most rental centers have a minimum time period; you can easily do a couple of lawns within that time period.

Aeration is another task that should be done on a semi-annual basis. A turf aerator removes "plugs" of soil and grass from the lawn. The holes left by the aerator allow oxygen, water and nutrients' to reach the root zone. Leave the "plugs" on top of the lawn; they will break down on their own.

Autumn is also the season to fertilize your lawn for the last time; further encouraging those roots. Much leaching of soil nutrients has occurred these past two rainy springs, so fertilizing is even more important than usual. Look for fertilizer high in nitrogen, or a winterizer-type, lower in nitrogen and higher in phosphorus and potassium. Fertilizing now will encourage lush growth next spring.

**If your lawn is looking a little worse for wear, autumn is the ideal time to reestablish the turf.**

### **1. Reseeding damaged areas**

The first decision that needs to be made is whether to spot-seed the bare areas or if the whole area needs to be reseeded. This decision is basically one of practicality. If the turf was simply thinned or there are small patches of dead grass about the size of baseballs, a fall fertilizer application and favorable weather conditions should help the existing turf grass to recover and fill in those bare spots. If the damaged areas are the size of soccer balls or larger, or if the area only has sporadic turf plants, then over seeding is going to be necessary to restore the area to turf.

## 2. Tools to renovate



There are a number of different methods to ensure that reseeding efforts are successful. First and foremost, you must ensure that you get good seed-to-soil contact. I like to use a leaf rake to make sure the seed is covered by the soil. Straw makes excellent mulch for new seed also. Spread a thin layer over the seeded area; make sure all of the seeded is covered.

## 3. Species, seeding depth, and rates

Making sure you have the correct species and cultivar, especially if you are over seeding an existing lawn, is a critical step to ensure satisfaction. One common frustration many homeowners have after over seeding is that the newly seeded turf has a drastically different color and appearance than the existing turf stand. Most turf grass in our area is San Augustine. San Augustine does best by plugs. Centipede can be sowed by seeds.

## 4. Fertilizer, irrigation, and herbicides

At the time of seeding, apply a starter fertilizer at a rate of 1 pound Nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. To help those young seedlings get established. A starter fertilizer is a fertilizer with an Nitrogen to Phosphate ratio similar to 1:1 or 1:1.5. Make sure to keep the seeded area moist throughout establishment. In many cases, this may require watering several times a day. A good mulch cover will help the area stay moist so the site may be watered less frequently. Water lightly when irrigating; there is no need to see water puddling or running off the site.



To be safe, avoid applying all herbicides this fall; i.e., no "weed and feed" products. Young seedlings don't tolerate herbicides very well and the guideline is usually to wait three "real" mowing's before applying any herbicides or, in some cases, at least 60 days. By "real" mowings, I mean you're actually cutting significant grass, not just running over the area to trim down any weeds. Always make sure to read and follow the label directions before applying any herbicides.

Try to keep fallen leaves and other debris off your lawn. If the lawn is quite tall, a final mowing may be needed, although it could be too late if grasses have gone dormant and are matted down.