



Get Out the Rake – Leaves Are Falling and Your Yard is Calling

When you first moved into your new home, you received information on how to care for the refrigerator, the range, and the heating and cooling system. But had you considered how to maintain your lawn? Soon after you signed the mortgage, you realized it is your job to keep the yard in top shape. And lawn care is a seasonal chore.

So resist the urge to hide the lawnmower in that dark, hidden corner of your garage. Then get out the rake. Unfortunately, the grass does not stop growing after Labor Day. And the leaves will soon begin to fall. Yes, summer is over. But your lawn care duties are far from complete. By doing a few lawn chores this fall, you will spare yourself from some work next spring.

So what exactly do you need to do? Try mowing, raking, weeding, aerating, soil testing, planting and fertilizing. Sound like a lot of work? It is. But you won't necessarily have to do it all, depending on the current condition of your lawn.

Here are some fall lawn care tips:

Test your soil. The wise lawn keeper tests his soil in the fall to determine its nutrient content. Soil that is saturated with nutrients can become saturated with water, drowning the lawn's grass. And grass growing out of nutrient-deficient soil is less resistant to drought, pests and disease. After testing your soil, you will know what kind of fertilizer it needs and can work to balance its nutrient content.

A test will also help you determine the soil's pH level, which affects the rate at which your grass will grow. Soil with a low pH level is highly acidic. When planted in overly acidic soil, grass has a difficult time soaking in nutrients. Sprinkle lime over your lawn in October to adjust its pH level.

Re-seed. Is your yard a little thin on top? Fall is the best time of year for reseeding your lawn to fill in those bare patches and make it full and lush by the following spring. To re-seed, first loosen the surface soil with a rake or shovel. Then spread the grass seed over the area evenly and gently rake to make sure the seed comes in contact with the soil. Apply a light layer of mulch. Re-seed the entire yard if you have a number of large bare spots. You can do this in one of two ways: overseed, or spread grass seed over the lawn grass you already have; or start from scratch, tilling your lawn and spreading new seed.

Aerate. Try core aerating your lawn before you re-seed it. This process loosens your lawn's soil so air, water and nutrients can better reach the grass roots. Lawn grasses root better in aerated soil. And increased oxygen levels help the grass grow. To make the job easy, use a mechanical aerator. A core aerator strikes through compacted soil, depositing cores of soil and thatch on the lawn's surface. After aerating, spread compost and lime over your lawn to protect the topsoil and add to its nutrient content.

Fertilize. To help promote root growth, you should fertilize your lawn in early November. Manure and other organic matter needs time to break down. If you fertilize your lawn in the fall, you give the fertilizers plenty of time to settle into the soil before the next spring when your grass will need access to plenty of nutrients. Apply approximately one pound of nitrogen-rich fertilizer, such as urea, to every 1,000 square foot of your lawn. But avoid using too much nitrogen-rich fertilizer in before late October. Nitrogen helps grass grow, and succulent new growth that first appears in October will probably not survive through the winter months. Then use a specially formulated winterizing fertilizer that is high in potassium, which gives grass the strength it needs to survive winter's storms. But don't fertilize your lawn to death. Too much fertilizer can 'burn' your lawn or even kill the grass.

Mow. Don't forget to put 'cutting the grass' on your fall lawn care itinerary. Well-fertilized grass keeps growing.. .and growing.. .and growing. So you have to keep mowing.. .and mowing... Some cool-season grasses, such as bluegrass, will keep growing into November. Mow as often as you think it is necessary but don't remove more than one-third of the leaf blade in any one cutting.

Rake. Before you even finish mowing the grass, you will have to start raking the leaves. Don't let the leaves stay on your lawn through the winter. A lawn covered with soggy leaves does not get enough oxygen or sunlight and is more prone to disease. You can shred small quantities of leaves with a leaf attachment on your lawnmower and leave them on your lawn as a thin layer of fertilizer. But you need to rake most of the leaves and remove them from your lawn.

Take care of your garden. Next task? Clean up your vegetable garden. If you leave your vegetable plants to rot and decompose in your garden, you might leave disease organisms along with them. Those organisms might revive in the spring and ruin next year's garden. Make a chart of where you placed each plant in this year's garden. You will want to rotate the crops next year. If you plant the same kinds of crops in the same spot in your garden year after year, you will deprive those crops of important nutrients. Try planting a cover crop to help keep the soil from washing away before next spring. Also, some cover crops, such as rye, clover and vetch, can help improve the soil's nutrient content.

Care for your trees. Enfold your trees in plastic tree wrap to prevent them from getting frost cracks. Tree cells located under the bark can move around during mid-winter thaws. If the cold weather returns, these cells will freeze again and consequently split open the bark. Next summer, harmful organisms can enter into these splits and destroy your trees.

Plant. Fall is a good season for planting trees and shrubs. These plants, if planted before the end of October, will have plenty of time to settle in before winter dormancy. Just make sure you mulch and water these newly planted trees and shrubs on a regular basis until they are well established.

You can also plant bulbs and flowers in the fall. Some autumn season plant species include chrysanthemums, marigolds, coreopsis, zebra grass, Russian sage, sea oats and ornamental cabbages. Plant bulbs, such as the Autumn crocus, that you want to bloom next spring.

Begin the 'War of the Weeds.' Apply a pre-emergence weed killer to control weeds that can crop up during the winter months. To save time, apply a combination fertilizer and weed killer.

So it does take some work. But if you follow these steps this fall, you will sigh relief next spring when your lawn peeps its glorious self through the last patches of sullen snow.