

Lawn Mowers and Leaf Piles

Fall is prime time for lawn care

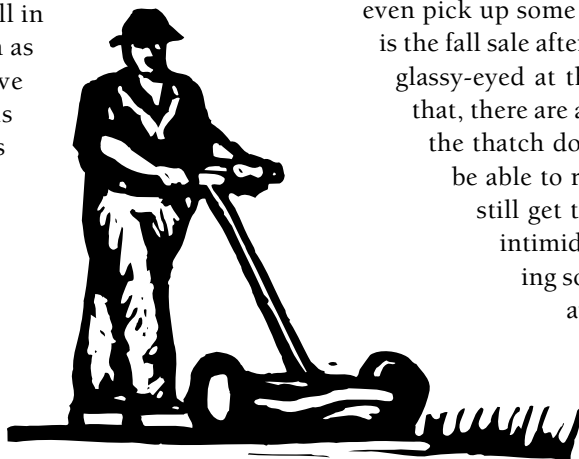
by **Becky Crouse**

We are nearing the end of summer. Already you can feel your calloused hands starting to soften with the thoughts of the upcoming mower-free winter. Before you get ahead of yourself, remember that autumn lawn care is vital to your lawn's health. It also requires some raking, so put down the hand lotion, stop gazing at the plummeting thermometer, and let's get your lawn ready for the impending winter.

Keep on Mowing

I know, Labor Day has passed, you have put away your patio furniture and traded your beach outings and barbecues for apple picking and baking, but your lawn is still growing. It doesn't know that Labor Day signals change for humans, and it doesn't care. As long as it is warm outside, your lawn will continue to remind you that it is there. This means you need to mow. Don't cringe, the frequency of your mowing should reduce as the temperature continues to drop, and you can finally use that handy leaf-mulching attachment for your mower. In the fall, the energy produced by photosynthesis is redirected for root growth and storage, which means that you can mow the grass a little shorter — to about 2 inches — to promote the production of new grass stems. This may help thicken your lawn and fill in some of those bare spots that form as the weeds die out. (The sensitive growing point for most weeds is near the top of the plant, whereas the sensitive growing point for grass is near the soil. Chopping the tops off the weeds will help to get rid of them.)

Leaving the shredded leaves and grass clippings on the lawn, as long as they don't accumulate to more than about a half-inch, will form a natural compost and feed the grass with mineral nutrients as they decompose. Unless you have that handy mulching attachment, you will want to rake up the falling leaves. OK, maybe you don't want to, but you will definitely need to. Allowing the leaves to sit on your lawn doesn't allow enough sunlight or oxygen through, and may lead to outbreaks of disease during the upcoming wet season. That will mean even more work for you later.



Thatch Therapy

Your next step: Dealing with thatch. Thatch is the layer of dead and living stems and roots that accumulate on the soil surface. When the thatch layer becomes thick, the roots will grow within the layer of thatch instead of establishing themselves deeply in the soil. The result is a lawn that is subject to moisture extremes with roots that aren't protected from tem-

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perature extremes and a thick layer that is harboring infectious fungi and disease. In short, your lawn isn't happy. What is the lawn keeper to do? Dethatch and aerate!

Dethatching involves removing that unsightly build up of decomposed stems and leaves sitting on the soil's surface and allowing fertilizer and water to penetrate and feed your starving soil. If you only have a few problem patches of thatch in your lawn, a thatching rake may be sufficient. You can buy one at your favorite lawn and garden store, and maybe even pick up some other fun tools while you're at it. (It is the fall sale after all.) If you are looking at your lawn, glassy-eyed at the thought of using a rake on all of that, there are also vertical mowers that cut through the thatch down into the soil surface. You should be able to rent one at that favorite store, so you still get to go. If it is all still sounding a little intimidating, you also have the option of hiring someone to do it for you, but that takes away all the fun.

Aerating will also help to decompose thatch. It loosens your soil, allowing air, water and nutrients to reach the roots of your grass that you have so effectively starved until now. Lawn grasses also root better in aerated soil, and oxygen will help the grass grow. Earthworms are your best soil aerators, but if they don't seem to be doing the job, or if you've killed them off by unwittingly applying a pesticide during the course of the summer, you're going to have to help out. If you only have a small area of lawn that has become compacted by

traffic, a special hollow-tined tool made especially for this purpose can be picked up at that lawn and garden supply store. If the job is a little large to be done by hand, rent a core aerator, a lawn-care machine that removes small plugs of soil, or call up your last-resort organic lawn care company to give you a hand. Your lawn will be much happier in the spring if you take these steps now.

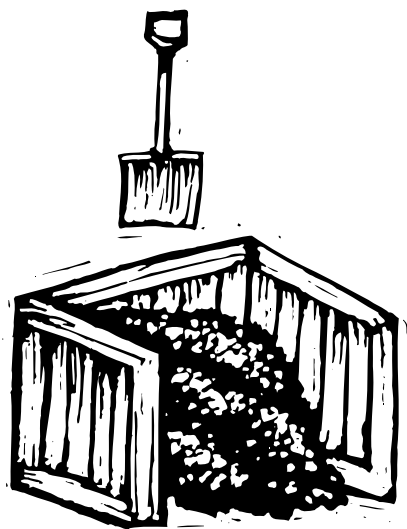
Proper Feeding

Fertilization will be your next concern. Your lawn may have been sending you signals about its needs all summer without you even realizing it. For example, grass loves nitrogen. Clover gets its nitrogen from the air, and grass from the soil. If clover starts taking over your lawn, chances are that your soil is nitrogen deficient. Dandelions love soil with a pH of 7.5, while grass loves a pH of 6.5. If your soil is alkaline, you will never conquer your dandelion problem. You can have your soil tested to determine its nutrient content and pH at your local cooperative extension.

If your soil is too acidic, add limestone to raise the pH. Limestone will also add calcium, which deters those pesky dandelions. (If you happen to like your dandelions, then you can skip this part.) You will need to wait about a week after adding lime to fertilize. If it is too alkaline, gypsum, sulfur, or peat moss will lower the pH.

Once your pH problem is solved, it's time to choose a fertilizer. By applying fertilizer in the fall, you give it plenty of time to settle into the soil before the spring when your grass will need its nutrients. You will want to select a fertilizer with nitrogen (to help grass grow), potassium (to give grass strength to survive the winter), and phosphorus (to foster strong root systems and aid in seedling germination) at levels corresponding with your lawn's needs. Be careful, because more is not better, and too much fertilizer can burn your lawn, which you have been so diligently caring for. Your fertilizer should release nutrients slowly, and should not be water soluble or you will lose most of your nutrients after the first rain. We, of course, recommend a good organic fertilizer or compost, which are both great sources of natural nutrients, easily "eaten" by your lawn as it needs sustenance, and harmless to microorganisms and earthworms. You can spread your fertilizer either by hand or with a mechanical distributor, purchased at that lawn and garden store again.

Now, amidst the flurry of your fall lawn chores, you may occasionally look around and notice your neighbors peer-



October is the best month to take care of your fall lawn-care chores. Here is a quick checklist to be sure that you are doing all that you can to keep your lawn healthy and happy.

- Continue to **MOW** through the fall, keeping the blade height slightly lower and using shredded grass clippings and leaves as mulch.
- **RAKE** your leaves if you don't have a mulching attachment for your lawn mower or if the layer of shredded clippings and leaves become more than a half-inch thick.
- **DETHATCH** your lawn if it has built up a layer of dead stems and leaves at the soil surface.
- **AERATE** the soil to allow oxygen, water, and nutrients to circulate.
- **TEST** the nutrient and pH levels of your soil to find out how to properly fertilize.
- **FERTILIZE** according to your soil's needs.
- **SEED** your lawn's bare spots, or overseed the entire lawn, if necessary.
- **MAINTAIN** your lawn until the cold really hits by continuing to mow and rake, making the final mow fairly short — about 1 1/2 inches.
- **ENJOY** your peace of mind knowing that, in the spring, your yard work is going to be reduced and your lawn is going to be healthier and thicker.

ing at you curiously, weed killer in hand, and scratching their heads in wonderment at your nifty new collection of lawn-care contraptions. This may be the ideal time to approach these folks and give them a little advice on achieving a healthy lawn without the herbicides and synthetic fertilizers. Maybe you can invite them to accompany you to the lawn and garden store and point out all the fun tools and nifty organic products that they, too, could be the proud owners of. If you could use some tips on effectively talking to others about reducing or eliminating their pesticide use, contact Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP for its guide, *Getting the Message Across* (4 pp).

After the brief detour with your neighbors, take a step back; look proudly at your happy, healthy soil, and smile, because you only have one more step. Yup, you guessed it. It's time to seed.

Becoming Seed Savvy

Are you confused by your choices in the grass seed aisle? Don't fret. Most of us are. Here are some basic guidelines for choosing a seed variety that will thrive in your lawn's conditions.



There are two major groups of grasses: cool season and warm season. Cool-season grasses, which include fine fescues, Kentucky bluegrass, and perennial ryegrass, are best for the northern half of the country. They typically grow in the spring and fall, when the ground is moist, and become dormant midsummer. Warm-season grasses, as you might guess, are more heat and drought tolerant than cool-season grasses and will do better in the Sun Belt or desert southwest. They typically start growing in the early summer. Warm-season grasses include St. Augustinegrass, bermudagrass, and zoysiagrass. If you live in a transition zone, you will want a mixture of cool- and warm-season varieties that will suit your climate.

You will want to take a look at that bag of seed before you haul it to the checkout counter. Be sure that your seed contains only fine-textured grass, check for a variety of names, and make sure that your mixture does not contain annual grasses, as they will not be back next year. You will also want the upgraded names of grasses, such as 'Merion' Kentucky bluegrass as opposed to plain old Kentucky bluegrass or common Kentucky bluegrass. **WARNING:** These days, many conventional seeds are also coated with fungicides that may put poisons in your soil, the very thing you have been working so hard to avoid. If you are having trouble finding fungicide-free seed at the local lawn and garden store, you can contact Seeds of Change (1-888-762-7333) for a catalog.

The Chemical-Free Lawn by Warren Schultz (Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA, 1989) offers these recommended mixes for some typical lawn conditions:

- A good general-purpose turfgrass for cool-region lawns is a mix of named Kentucky bluegrass and red fescue.
- For shade, a mix should include more fescue than bluegrass. Another option is a 40-40-20 mix of named Kentucky bluegrass, red fescue, and perennial ryegrass. For heavy use, plant 95 percent named turf type tall fescue with 5 percent Kentucky bluegrass.
- For open, sunny locations, a good mix of 40 to 60 percent 'Merion' Kentucky bluegrass, with the remainder made up of other improved bluegrasses.
- An equal mix of improved red fescue and improved Kentucky bluegrass is also good for the sun.

For a copy of Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP's least-toxic lawn care information packet, send \$4 ppd to Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP, 701 E Street, SE, Washington, DC 20003, 202-543-5450, or through our website, www.beyondpesticides.org.

Seed Savvy

Fall is the best time for seeding. You can fill in those ugly bare patches that have been mocking you all season and then look forward to a full, lush spring. To reseed, you need to roughen up the surface soil of those bare patches with a rake or shovel. (You must own one of those by now with all those trips you've made to your now least-favorite store, the local lawn and garden center.) Spread the grass seed over the loosened area evenly, and gently rake it to make sure that the seeds are actually coming in contact with your happy soil. Now apply a light layer of mulch or fertilizer and give your seedlings a nice drink. However, if you are looking over your lawn thinking that it is more of a bare patch than an actual lawn, you may want to reseed the entire thing. This can be accomplished by either overseeding (spreading grass seed over the grass you already have) or starting from scratch, tilling your entire lawn, and then spreading new seed. You can also hire someone to do this for you.



Upkeep

Keep an eye on your lawn, and be sure to keep it trimmed and leaf free as we head towards the end of fall. Give it a nice, short haircut as the final mow (about 1 1/2 inches), and then sit back in front of the fireplace with your hot chocolate and fresh-baked apple pie, think about those weekends that you won't be stuck doing yardwork, and look forward to spring.

It seems like a lot of work, and, if you are doing it for the first time, it is. But, if you keep your lawn up with proper maintenance year round, it will be thicker, healthier, happier, and require much less work in the end.