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Lawn Repair and Other Fall Lawn Tips

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As the heat of summer fades into cooler nights and warm days, it is an ideal time to seed lawns that were thinned out during the summer. Weed competition is greatly reduced by September, so new grass has a good opportunity to get established. Any dead grass can be raked up to expose the soil, and then these open areas can be seeded. A little compost can be sprinkled over the seed or with the seed to help maintain moisture. Keep seed consistently moist to ensure optimum seed germination. Use a starter fertilizer containing high phosphorus levels for better root establishment if your soil tests low in phosphorus, or just use an organic or synthetic fertilizer that contains a slow-release type of nitrogen instead.



Dead grass should be raked up to expose soil surface before seeding.
Keep seed evenly moist to ensure optimum germination.

Sod can be used instead of seed for a quicker establishment of turf on larger dead areas of the lawn. Dead areas can be cut out using a sod cutter or dead grass can be raked out to expose the soil. The most common sod species that homeowners would use is Kentucky bluegrass. Do realize that if the remaining lawn contains other species, sod planting of Kentucky bluegrass may contrast in color with the rest of the lawn. Some rhizomatous turf-type tall fescues are also available as sod. Laying sod on a compacted soil will result in poor rooting so aerifying or rototilling may need to be done before sodding to loosen the soil. Put down a slow-release nitrogen fertilizer that contains some phosphorus or use a starter fertilizer before laying down the sod. Water as needed until roots are established.

Lawns can be fertilized at the same time seeding takes place. Fertilize established lawns by mid-September using a slow release fertilizer if only one application of nitrogen will be made in the fall. If a fast-release nitrogen fertilizer is used, water it in immediately or put it down before a light rain. A second application of a fast-release nitrogen fertilizer can be made by October 15.

Compacted lawns can be aerified now. Hollow tines that remove cores of soil should be used, and after cores are dry, they can be broken up and soil can be raked back into the holes. Slice-seeding can be done after aerifying, if needed. Fertilize afterward to help grass fill in and recover before cold weather sets in.



Slice-seeding a thinned lawn area. Go in two directions at a half rate of seed each time when slice-seeding. Over bare ground in larger areas it is best to broadcast seed.

If surface-feeding insects like billbugs or chinch bugs have been a chronic problem, consider using endophyte-enhanced grasses on these areas of the lawn. Endophytes are naturally occurring fungi that live inside certain grass plant species and will cause surface feeding insects to perish when they feed on above-ground grass plant parts. Endophytes are not in grass roots, so grubs will not be affected. Certain turf-type tall and fine leaved fescues and some perennial ryegrasses contain endophytes, and grass seed labels should indicate if the seed contains them.

Leaves can be mulched into very fine pieces and left on the lawn if desired. Mulched leaves should be kept under a half-inch thick to help decomposition and to avoid suffocating grass crowns and leaf blades. Over time, finely mulched leaves can improve soils and block out weeds as they will cover tiny open areas that grass can fill in later. Grass seed can be scattered into small open areas of soil and then leaves can be finely mulched over them with a mower. This will help seed remain moist after watering so germination can still take place. Only mulch dry leaves that are not over a couple of inches deep. Over that depth, rake them up and compost or spread them out over a larger area and then mow.



Lawn after using a mower with a mulching blade to mulch a 4 inch layer of dry leaves. Grass blades should not be covered entirely by mulched leaves.

Raking leaves is a good way to remove some thatch, but hard raking before new grass has a chance to root deeply may pull out some of the grass seedlings. If possible, blow leaves until the new grass can root deeper, then lightly rake leaves after that. Never let leaves remain on the lawn at any depth over the winter as this will suffocate the grass underneath them.

As frosts arrive, crabgrass will die, but may leave seeds behind for potential infestation next year. Squirrels can make a zillion holes in the lawn as they bury and dig up acorns. Seed these holes as they appear. Other than a last nitrogen fertilizer application before October 15, a final mowing as grass stops growing and the raking of leaves, lawn chores should soon come to a happy conclusion.

For more information on lawn care or for other horticultural information or answers to your gardening questions, feel free to contact us at (877) 486-6271, visit our [website](#), or call your local Cooperative Extension Center.