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Late Summer Lawn Care Tips

By Pamm Cooper, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Late summer is an ideal time to renovate a lawn in poor condition in New England. Usually the shorter days bring slightly cooler weather where grass seed can germinate quickly but weed competition is less severe. There is still time for the grass seedlings to put down an adequate root system before the ground freezes and to store up carbohydrates for the next spring. Late summer and early fall rains help keep the seed moist for germination and help new plants take up the nutrients they need for proper establishment. If a slow release fertilizer is used instead of a starter fertilizer, another application should not be necessary before the grass stops growing. Seed small bare spots to keep weeds at bay the next spring.

Compaction and heavy thatch are two common lawn problems that can benefit from attention as temperatures begin to go down after the heat of summer. Aerification and dethatching can be done either in the spring or late summer/early fall. Keep in mind that grass needs about thirty growing days to recover from these procedures. Overseeding can also be done, especially after aerifying and dethatching. Limestone can be applied as needed after core aerifying, going directly into the soil at a faster rate than if applied to non-aerified soils.

Any grubs that are present in late summer without any preventative control measures having been applied may need attention. A healthy turf can withstand up to ten or twelve grubs per square foot without showing too much damage. If more than that are found, try using Hb nematodes and see if adequate control results. Any grubs not controlled now will be present next spring, unless, of course, skunks or crows eliminate enough of them. Any damaged areas should be raked up and seeded. Call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center to discuss chemical control options.

This time of year is an especially good time to control many broadleaf perennial weeds. They are still growing and herbicides will be translocated throughout a plant's tissue in time to control its growth. Most broadleaf weed killers will work best when temperatures are between 50 and 80°F, and some weeds, like ground ivy, are best treated after the first frost. Perennial weeds that have rhizomes, stolons or runners may need a repeat application the next spring. If only a few weeds are the problem, consider hand-pulling them and put some grass seed in their place.

Moles that seemed to have disappeared during the summer may have returned as they follow the earthworms upward in the ground as soil temperatures cool again. If moles are wreaking havoc in the lawn, see if grubs may be the attraction and, if so, treatment may be necessary. But do not apply grub control products just because mole damage is seen. Check for the presence of grubs first. If your property borders a deciduous wood line, then moles may be almost impossible to control as earthworms are in abundance under the leaf litter and venture into the lawn as they search for worms. Moles can be trapped but success depends on properly determining the travel tunnel and setting up the trap over that. Consider designating heavily damaged lawn areas near woods as a woodland garden, if all else fails.

Late summer or fall is an ideal time to top-dress lawns low in organic matter with mature compost. Light, sandy soils will especially benefit from this as over time soil with higher amounts of organic matter will hold more water and nutrients. A quarter inch depth is the usual recommendation.

If fertilizing is done once a year, late summer/early fall is the ideal time to apply it. Organic fertilizers are best applied when soil will still be warm enough for microbes to break it down before cold weather sets in. Fast-release fertilizers

should not be applied after October 15 in New England. Lush grass growth should not be encouraged too late in the season as this provides an ideal environment for snow molds to develop, especially if snow cover occurs over unfrozen soils.

If a soil test has not been done in a while, do it now. If limestone is needed it can be applied any time of year if the ground is not frozen. Any nutritional problems can be revealed and steps can be taken to correct any problems before the next growing season. Soil tests can help determine the best fertilizer to apply for your lawn's specific needs, and any amendments that may be needed. If corrections cannot be made, and site conditions will not afford an acceptable stand of turf grass, late summer and fall are ideal times to install landscapes that will do better.

And last of all, enjoy the lawn in late summer and fall. Dark green grass will be growing slower and drought and heat should be a thing of the past. Get outside on a comfortable chair with a good book and a refreshment of choice and enjoy the fruits of your labor.

For questions about lawn care or other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.