Video of the Week: Fertilize in the Fall for a Healthy Lawn

Give Cool-Season Grasses a Boost

September is almost here and that means it is prime time to fertilize your tall fescue or Kentucky bluegrass lawns. If you could only fertilize your cool-season grasses once per year, this would be the best time to do it.

These grasses are entering their fall growth cycle as days shorten and temperatures moderate (especially at night). Cool-season grasses naturally thicken up in the fall by tillering (forming new shoots at the base of existing plants) and, for bluegrass, spreading by underground stems called rhizomes. Consequently, September is the most important time to fertilize these grasses. Apply 1 to 1.5 pounds of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. The settings recommended on lawn fertilizer bags usually result in about 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. We recommend a quick-release source of nitrogen at this time. Most fertilizers sold in garden centers and department stores contain either quick-release nitrogen or a mixture of quick- and slow-release. Usually only lawn fertilizers recommended for summer use contain slow-release nitrogen. Any of the others should be quick-release.

The second most important fertilization of cool-season grasses also occurs during the fall. A November fertilizer application will help the grass green up earlier next spring and provide the nutrients needed until summer. It also should be quick-release applied at the rate of 1-pound actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. (WU)
Watering Restrictions and Seeding

Hopefully most areas received rain this last weekend. Even if your area did receive rain, previously established watering restrictions may not have been lifted. Since many lawns were damaged or destroyed by the severe summer, homeowners are wondering when to reestablish the lawn in light of those watering restrictions. Following are some thoughts on what can be done.

Overseeding but weed control not needed:
- Can seed now and wait for rain if none was received. Just realize that watering restrictions will probably not be lifted after a single rain and so you will be totally dependent on rainfall to keep that grass alive.
- Wait until the watering restrictions are lifted.

Overseeding with weed control.
- Good weed control is unlikely if the weeds are under drought stress. Wait for rain and the weeds to begin growth before spraying. If you are only after broadleaf weeds like dandelions, then there will probably be a wait of three weeks from spraying to overseeding. If you also need to control crabgrass, then four weeds before overseeding is more likely. Read the label.

Starting over:
Tilling: Tilling may not be possible until rain softens the soil. Seeding can take place immediately after tilling and any dirt work you need to do. Fertilize with a starter fertilizer. That starter fertilizer should be put down before tilling the last time. Then broadcast the seed and lightly rake it in.

Spraying with glyphosate: Again, the weeds must be growing well for the glyphosate (Roundup, Killzall, etc.) to work. Wait two weeks after spraying, then scalp the grass, and either core aerate and slit seed. Apply fertilizer and seed.

General recommendations

Good Seed/Soil Contact: Nothing good happens unless you have good seed soil contact. Seed laying on top of the ground rarely germinates and grows. A leaf rake can be used to lightly mix the seed into the soil. Some seed will still be visible after mixing.

Fertilization: Use soil test recommendations or a starter fertilizer at the rate suggested on the bag. The fertilizer should be applied before tilling (if you are tilling) or after slit seeding or core aerating.

Watering: Keep the soil moist but not waterlogged. During a hot spell in late August, that may mean a
light watering three times a day. As weather cools, cut down to once a day. After grass starts growing, gradually back off on watering.

**Mowing:** Mow when the seedlings reach 3 to 4 inches tall. (WU)

**PESTS**

**Boxelder Bugs on Maples**

The boxelder bug is being seen on maples in the Newton area. Though boxelder is usually the preferred host, maples and sometimes ash can also be hosts. The adult is about 1/2-inch long, blackish with three red stripes on the thorax and red at the base of the wings. The nymphs are smaller and have red abdomens and lack wings.

This insect overwinters in the adult stage and seeks protection from the cold in houses, walls, around doors and windows, and various other cracks and crevices. Therefore, people with large populations on maples may have problems with these insects invading homes later in the fall. Inside the home, the adults become pests by their numbers, produce a foul odor when crushed, and may stain curtains with their fecal matter. They do not harm humans, clothing, structures, or food, but high populations are annoying. The best way to keep them out of the house is to seal cracks, gaps, or other points of entry with caulking compound or putty, and to use weather stripping around foundations, windows, and doors. Bugs found inside can be collected with a vacuum cleaner. Used bags should be removed and sealed so the pests don't escape. (WU)

**FLOWERS**

**Dividing Peonies**

Peonies are a favorite perennial of gardeners because of their beauty and low maintenance. In Kansas, peonies provide a beautiful display of flowers each spring before Memorial Day. Though peonies can be left in place indefinitely, many gardeners wish to increase their plantings and use a process known as division to accomplish this. Keep in mind, however, that peonies often take about three years to return to full bloom and size after division.
Fall is the traditional time to divide these plants. The first step in division is to remove the foliage. Peonies are essentially dormant by September 1 even though the foliage is still green. Then dig out the entire plant. Shake and wash off as much soil as possible so that the pink buds or "eyes" are visible. Peony roots are tough, and a sharp knife is needed to cut the roots into separate pieces. Make sure each division has three to four buds. Make sure the location chosen for planting receives at least a half-day of full sun. However, the more sun, the better. Space the plants so that there is at least 2 feet between dwarf types and 4 feet between the standard types.

Follow the same rules for planting these divisions as you do for new plants. Make sure the pink buds are about 1 inch below the soil surface. If they are set more than 2 inches deep, flowering may be delayed or completely prevented. As you set the plants, firm soil often as it is added around the plant. If the soil is not firmed, it can settle and pull the plant down with it. Water in well after planting and water as necessary through the fall and winter to keep the soil moist.

It is often a good idea to add mulch to the new planting to protect it from heaving. The alternate freezing and thawing that commonly occurs during Kansas winters can "heave" weakly rooted plants out of the ground. Add a mulch of straw, leaves, compost or other material after the soil freezes. Remember, it is not the cold that harms these plants but the alternate freezing and thawing of the soil. (WU)

**Peonies May Be Cut Back Now**

Most peonies have been dormant for some time now due to the drought. If yours are watered, they can still be cut back. Peonies are essentially dormant by September 1 even though leaves may still be green. Cut leaves off close to the ground and compost or discard. (WU)

**ORNAMENTALS**

**Purple Twirl**

Beautyberry is such a pleasant surprise this time of year. I say that because during the summer it has a tendency to look wild and maybe a little weedy (my opinion—other’s say “long slender branches arch and touch the ground at their tips”).

This small shrub (4 to 6 feet tall and wide) flowers
from June to August with small white blossoms that twirl around the stems. Resulting berries also twirl around the stems from September to October (sometimes into November). The berries are brilliant, bright lilac-violet (sometimes even metallic purple) in color, which is guaranteed to stop visitors in your garden.

Purple beautyberry (*Callicarpa dichotoma*) grows quickly, requires moderate water and can be grown in full sun or part shade. In harsh winters it may die back to the ground, but it will return again in the spring. No worries, anyhow, since you will want to prune the plant back to within 18 inches or less to get the best berry show next year (flowers on new wood).

Fruit on the beautyberry plant are also great for birds and other wildlife. While the seeds do germinate easily, they are not weedy underneath the plant.

Cultivars of beautyberry include ‘Early Amethyst’ (bright purple, abundant fruit), ‘Albifructus’ (white fruit), and ‘Duet’ (a variegated foliage form—green leaves with an uneven yellow margin; white fruit). ‘Duet’ is a U.S. National Arboretum introduction (2006). (CRB)

**MISCELLANEOUS**

**Harvesting and Roasting Sunflower Seeds**

Sunflowers are usually ready to be harvested beginning in mid-September and into October. Seed heads can ripen on the plant, but they will need protection from birds. Try covering the heads with a paper sack or cheesecloth once the petals start turning brown. Use a twist tie or rubber band to secure the covering. This will not only help keep birds out but will prevent ripened seeds from dropping out of the head.

Check for maturity by looking for the following signs:
– Florets in the brown center of the flower disk should be shriveled.
– Heads should have turned down.
– The backside of the head should be lemon yellow.

The ultimate check, of course, is to pull a few seeds to see if they have turned black with white stripes, the typical color. Empty shells usually indicate a lack of pollination earlier in the year. If heads are to remain uncovered, harvest when a few seeds start turning black and white. The flavor will not be good as when seeds are allowed to ripen on the plants, but fewer seeds will be lost. Cut the heads and place in a paper sack. Some people prefer to cut the heads with about a foot of stem attached and hang them upside down in a dry, well-ventilated area. A paper bag or cheesecloth can be placed over the heads to prevent seeds from dropping as they dry. Seeds can be easily removed from
Dry heads by rubbing gently.

**Roasting Seeds**

Raw, mature seeds may be prepared at home by covering unshelled seeds with salted water (2 quarts of water to 1/4 to 2 cup salt). Bring to a boil and simmer 2 hours, or soak in the salt solution overnight. Drain and dry on absorbent paper.

Put sunflower seeds in a shallow pan in a 300-degree F oven for 30 to 40 minutes or until golden brown, stirring occasionally. Take seeds out of the oven and add 1 teaspoon of melted butter or margarine, or cooking oil per 1 cup of seeds if they are to be eaten immediately. Stir to coat. Put on an absorbent towel. Salt to taste. (WU)

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