

Area lawns have taken a real beating over the last few years. First they were subjected to multiple years of long, hot, drought ridden summers and winters with virtually no precipitation. Then, they faced a year of nearly double the average annual rainfall. Finally, this year they saw average precipitation in the spring, followed by excess rainfall in early summer and a fairly dry month of August. All this variety in the weather has resulted in lawns that look less than stellar.

If your lawn has suffered through the ever-changing weather of the last four years, it might be time to revitalize it. Take a moment to examine your lawn and decide if it needs a little TLC. If so, fall is the perfect time to provide just that boost.

Start by looking for broadleaved weeds. It seems as though weeds were the only things that continued to thrive through all the weather, and you may just find they are the only thing green left in your yard. Now, weeds are not all bad, they do provide shelter and a food source to some beneficial insects that you will be happy to have in your garden, so there is no reason to try to eradicate every last one. Unfortunately, weeds distract from the look of a beautiful, uniform lawn and are not as effective as a healthy stand of grass at holding soils in place. If you find that broadleaved weeds are taking a strong hold on your lawn, October and November are the best months to do something about it. Most gardeners want to treat for weeds mid-summer when they first notice the weeds, but the reality is that applying a broadleaf weed killer in October and November will provide the best, most lasting results.

If wiregrass is the major problem in your yard, rather than broadleaved weeds, you will need to take a different approach. Wiregrass is also known as Bermuda grass. It is actually the chosen turf species for some gardeners, but if you are trying to grow a fescue lawn, it is an unwelcome visitor. Wiregrass cannot be treated in the same manner as broadleaved weeds. It, like the fescue grass it is overtaking is not a broadleaf, therefore those type weed killers will not work on it. Unfortunately, any weed killer designed to kill wiregrass will also kill fescue. There are two choices when wiregrass invades. The first is to let it slowly take over the fescue, ultimately being permitted to take over the entire lawn. This would provide you with a warm-season Bermuda grass lawn that would thrive even in a hot dry summer, but would be brown and dormant through the winter. If you prefer a lawn that retains much of its color through the winter, then you will want to maintain your cool-season, fescue lawn by killing out the wiregrass that it is invading it. Do this by spot treating with a glyphosate product. These products will kill fescue as well, so they should be used with caution to avoid damage to desirable plants or to healthy areas of the lawn. Apply glyphosate while the plants are still actively growing and temperatures are still warm. Wait two weeks and treat again any remaining wiregrass. In two more weeks you will be ready to reseed the areas where you killed the wiregrass. Never attempt to pull wiregrass or kill it by tilling it into the soil. These actions will actually propagate more wiregrass, as small segments of the stems will break off, root and re-sprout.

Once you have taken account of your weed situation and have come up with a plan for treating both narrow and broadleaved weeds, you can take a soil sample to determine the soil's pH and nutrient capacity. It is recommended that soil tests be taken every two to three years. This year it is particularly important to consider taking a soil test as, the heavy rains of the last few years have likely washed away many nutrients and dramatically adjusted the quality of the soil. Soil test kits are available from the local Extension Offices and a few farm and garden centers provide soil-testing services.

You will likely find in testing your soils that lime is necessary. Turf prefers to be grown with a soil pH of 6.2 to 6.5 and our soils have a tendency to be naturally more acidic than that. The preference of a plant to a particular pH is related to its ability to capture necessary nutrients. Nutrients are all available in different concentrations at different pH levels. The nutritional needs of a plant will dictate which pH is preferred. This is important to note because arbitrarily applying more and more fertilizers to a weak looking lawn will not guarantee nutrient uptake, rather will be a waste of money and a potential threat to water quality. It is essential that soil pH be adjusted before efforts are made to fertilize.

With the soil pH adjusted, you will be ready to fertilize your cool-season lawn. For regular maintenance use a 4-1-2 ratio fertilizer in September, October and November.

If you find that it is also necessary to establish new grass in some areas, start by tilling or aerating the area. Then select a good quality fescue seed mix of at least three types of fescues. In shadier areas choose a fine leaf fescue such as creeping red. Use four to six pounds of seed per 1000 square feet. Add ten pounds of 10-10-10 fertilizer for every 1000 square feet.

Thin areas of turf can be built up with over-seeding. Again, choose a good quality fescue seed. Then, apply two to three pounds per 1000 square feet.

This fall, dedicate some time and effort to improving the quality of your lawn. With a little examination and effort, you will be able to re-establish a beautiful, lush, healthy lawn, the benefits of which are not only esthetic. Healthy lawns also help protect water quality by reducing pollutants running off into our waterways. You will be pleased with the results.