FALL LAWN CARE

Home lawns in most years usually struggle through the perils of summer—high heat, humidity, drought and insect problems. June was cool and wet here in Northeast Missouri and the last two weeks of July were hot and dry with temperatures over 100 for several days.

We usually look forward to cooler nighttime temperatures and additional rain in September. With this in mind, it’s time to think about some fall lawn maintenance and aeration followed by some fertilization and over-seeding. It’s also a good time to establish a new lawn if that is needed.

Aeration is a practice of pulling soil plugs to open the soil surface for better nutrient and water movement. It is a practice that also helps to reduce compaction and thatch by spreading soil plugs on the surface. Soil plugs are crumbled and fall freely into aeration holes as well as spreading some soil into the thatch layer where soil microbes can feed on thatch debris. Aeration can be done in both spring and fall. Aeration is the very best way to begin a fall fertilization program. Applications of fertilizer after aeration will move nutrients immediately into the root zone of your lawn. This practice has shown excellent results in the density and color of cool-season turfgrasses on their way to recovery from summer stresses.

Aeration equipment can be found at local rental stores or garden centers. A machine that pulls a ½” diameter plug three to four inches deep on four inch centers will do an excellent job. Machines that force hollow tines into the soil are better than pull-type drums with tines. Not all machines will meet these specifications, however any amount of aeration is better than no aeration to kick-off fall fertilization.

Fall fertilization should always start with a soil test to determine what the needs of the soil are, if any. Soil test results will also give you the soil pH and any information about lime requirements. Soil pH is also important as it effects nutrient availability to the plant. A soil pH between 6.0 and 7.0 is acceptable. A soil pH around 6.4 to 6.8 is optimum. MU guide # G6954, “Soil Testing for Lawns” gives information on how to take and submit soil samples to the University of Missouri Soil Testing Labs.

Homeowners have a wide variety of fertilizers available to them for fall fertilization. Many organic fertilizers, such as Milorganite, Sustane and Ringer are available and will provide an excellent source of slow released nitrogen. Organic fertilizers do require soil microbes to release nutrients, therefore as soil temperatures decrease by late fall, performance of these fertilizers may drop off.

(Continued on page 2)
HARVESTING & STORING WINTER SQUASH

Winter squash can be harvested whenever the fruits have turned a deep, solid color and the rind is hard. Harvest the main part of the crop in September or October, before heavy frosts hit your area. Cut squash from the vines carefully, leaving two inches of stem attached if possible. Avoid cuts and bruises when handling. Fruits that are not fully mature, have been injured, have had their stems knocked off, or have been subjected to heavy frost do not keep and should be used as soon as possible or be composted (watch for seedlings in the compost).

Store in a dry building where the temperature is between 50 and 55°F. For prolonged storage, do not pile squash more than two fruits deep. It is preferable, where space allows, to place the fruits in a single layer so they do not touch each other. This arrangement minimizes the potential spread of rots.

The squash family (Cucurbitaceae) includes pumpkins, summer squash and winter squash. They are really edible gourds. There are many varieties with a wide range of flavors and textures. Winter squash does not look the same as summer squash. Their tough outer shells can be smooth or bumpy, thin or thick and rock hard with a wide array of colors. The most popular winter squash includes acorn, buttercup, butternut, calabaza, delicata, Hubbard, spaghetti, sweet dumpling, and Turk's Turban. There are many more, but this section will be limited to the above-mentioned varieties.

Winter squash is planted in the spring, grows all summer and is always harvested at the mature stage in early autumn before the first frost. Immature winter squash lacks flavor, so wait until the rind is hard. Harvest winter squash with two inches of stem remaining. A stem cut too short is like an open wound, which will cause early decay. For storage, harvest sturdy, heavy squashes with fairly glossy skin that is unblemished by soft spots, cuts, breaks or uncharacteristic discoloration. Most winter squash benefits from a curing stage; the exceptions are acorn, sweet dumpling and delicata. Curing is simply holding the squash at room temperature (about 70°) for 10 to 20 days. After curing, transfer to a cool (45 to 50 degrees), dry place such as the basement or garage for long term storage. Do not allow them to freeze. The large hard rind winter squash can be stored up to six months under these conditions. Warmer temperatures simply mean shorter storage time. Smaller acorn and butternut do not store as well, only up to 3 months. Store cut pieces of winter squash in the refrigerator. Refrigeration is too humid for whole squash, and they will deteriorate quickly.

Source: University of Illinois Extension, http://urbanext.illinois.edu/veggies/wsquash.cfm

More inorganic types of fertilizers are available to homeowners and can be somewhat confusing. Many products have higher amounts of nitrogen and most are soluble forms (quick release) of fertilizers. Quick release forms of fertilizers are gone after about two weeks. You will get a quick flush of green growth, then a quick tapering off of color and growth. Find fertilizers with a good balance of N-P-K (nitrogen/phosphorus/potassium) with a ratio somewhere around 3-1-2. Also look at the ingredient label on the bag and find a product with 30 to 70% slow-release nitrogen. This way your fertilizer is released over a longer period of time requiring fewer applications and allowing the plants to more efficiently utilize plant nutrients.

Fertilizer rates for fall fertilization give best results if 2.5 to 3.0 lbs of nitrogen can be applied per 1,000 square feet. Amounts should be divided over two or three applications throughout the fall. Possible combinations would include a pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet in early September after aeration and/or de-thatching followed by 1.5 pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet in late October. A second alternative would include a pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet applied in early September, October and November. Most fertilizers are complete fertilizers including phosphorus and potassium; therefore requirements for those nutrients should be based on soil test results. Soil test results indicating high to very high amounts of phosphorus and potassium may require applications of fertilizers with nitrogen alone.

Winterizing fertilizers are usually recommended as the final application of the fall. Good winter fertilizers will have higher and equal amounts of nitrogen and potassium (first and third numbers of the fertilizer components). However, there are conflicting comments about applications of potassium for hardening off plants before winter dormancy. Plants harden off by reducing the amount of water in plant cells, therefore reducing the threat of winter freezing. It is a practice of higher importance for warm-season (bermuda and zoysia) grasses as opposed to cool-season grasses.

Any additional questions on aeration and fall fertilization can be directed to the MU Turfgrass Research Center @ (573) 442-4893.

Source: Brad S. Fresenburg, Extension/Research Associate, FresenburgB@missouri.edu
LOCAL FOOD UPDATE

Since starting the local food updates, I have had many conversations with people about growing and eating local food. It’s nice to know that there really are a lot of people out there making an effort to grow, eat or buy local. I’ve also had many conversations about the environment regarding recycling, using rain barrels, composting, and using organic or natural products both inside the home and outside in the garden. I do know of several people that have made rain barrels and raised beds this summer, and some who have tried companion planting for insect control. Thank you to all of you who are making the effort to use environmentally friendly practices and eat local food.

It’s been wonderful having such a variety of produce to cook with this summer. Just about every night for the past two months, we have had a meal from local products. I’ve found many ways to use zucchini, yellow squash and tomatoes. I even made zucchini soup with fresh mushrooms (from California). It was very tasty! I made a vegetable lasagna using hamburger, a white sauce and sliced fresh vegetables. It was very yummy too! I also made a zucchini pie which tastes just like apple pie. I can hardly keep up with making salsa at my house. I make it and in just days it’s gone. I still haven’t any to enjoy during the winter months. I have canned some dill and sweet pickles, enough that we can have one jar a month until next September. We were given a currant tomato plant by our friend Teri, who started it from seed which was given to her by our friend Glinda. Currant tomatoes are the size of actual currants. They are really good. My oldest son will clean off the plant of ripe current tomatoes in just five minutes. He loves them! My youngest son and I have been eating fresh peaches for a couple of weeks now. They are so good. The ones I purchased came out of Illinois. We’ve also been eating a lot of local cantaloupe and watermelon, and sweet corn we grew in the extension garden.

We haven’t eaten our chickens yet. They’ve now been in the freezer for about six weeks. My husband said he was ready for some fried chicken, so I guess I’ll be making some soon. We’ve been buying local eggs all summer and making a lot of vegetable scrambled eggs and some omelets. I bought some local cheese just the other day from a store here in town. The cheese was produced at the creamery in Milton, Iowa, not too far from here. It was some pretty awesome cheese. Since it’s not too expensive I plan to start buying it more often.

Until next month, keep growing, eating or buying local!

KNOWING WHEN TO HARVEST Pears CAN BE TRICKY

Ripe pears are a delicious treat. But have you had pears sit on your counter, stay rock hard, get gritty or rot without getting sweetly ripe? Unlike apples which are also a treat this time of the year, most pear varieties do not ripen nicely while still on the tree. Pears that are allowed to become too mature or to ripen on the tree develop a coarse, mealy texture and often have core breakdown. Whether you grow pears at home, or buy them in the store, it is sometimes challenging to know when to pick them, then how long to ripen them to perfection. And how do you tell when a pear is ready to eat?

Determining when pears are ready to harvest is tricky. If you wait too long, many fruit will become overripe and fall to the ground. This results in soft bruised pears that do not keep well. Don’t wait for pears to turn yellow or soft before you pick them. Soft or yellow pears are too ripe. Instead, pick them before they mature and let them ripen off the tree in a cool place. Don’t expect pears to be palatable right off the tree. Look for these signs to help you decide when your pears are ready to harvest. One, the dark leaf-green skin color turns lighter green or yellowish green. Two, the small dots on the fruit change from white to brown. Three, the skin takes on a waxy feel and the pebbly surface becomes smooth. Four, the fruit stem separates easily from spur or twig with an upward twist of the pear. Five, the seeds have turned brown.

Handle pears carefully while harvesting and put them into storage. Pears bruise easily and bruised fruit does not store well. Store pears in a cool humid location such as the refrigerator. Remember, the longer the time between picking and storing, the shorter the storage life.

Source: Kemper Center for Home Gardening at Missouri Botanical Garden http://www.mobot.org/gardeninghelp/plantfinder/Hortline.asp?code=3505
GARDENING TIPS FOR SEPTEMBER

ORNAMENTALS
- Plant evergreens now.
- Take cuttings of annuals to have vigorous plants for over-wintering.
- Plant spring bulbs except for tulips as soon as they are available. Keep tulips in a cool, dark place and plant in late October.
- Divide perennials, especially spring bloomers. Enrich the soil with peat moss or compost before replanting.
- Divide peonies now. Replant in a sunny site and avoid planting deeply.
- Lift gladiolus when their leaves yellow. Cure in an airy place until dry before husking.
- Begin forcing poinsettias to bloom at the end of the month. Place plants in a cool, dark room or closet from 5 p.m. until 8 a.m. for about 8 weeks or until top leaves turn red.

VEGETABLES
- Sowing seeds of radish, lettuce, spinach, and other greens in a cold frame will prolong fall harvests.
- Pinch out the top of Brussel sprout plants to plump out the developing sprouts.
- Keep broccoli picked regularly to encourage additional production of side shoots.

FRUIT
- Pick pears before they are fully mature. Store in a cool, dark basement to ripen. Discard any spoiled or fallen fruits.
- Paw paws ripen in the woods now.
- Check peach tree trunks to just below the soil line for gummy masses caused by borers. Probe holes with thin wire to puncture borers.

TURFGRASS
- Begin fall seeding or sodding of cool season grasses. Seedbeds should be raked, dethatched, core-aerified, fertilized, and seeded. Keep newly planted lawn areas moist, but not too wet.
- If soils become dry, established lawns should be watered thoroughly to a depth of 4-6 inches.
- Cool season lawns are best fertilized in fall. Make up to 3 applications between now and December. Do not exceed rates recommended by fertilizer manufacturer.
- It is not uncommon to see puff balls in lawn areas at this time.
- Newly seeded lawns should not be cut until they are at least 2-3 inches tall.

MISCELLANEOUS
- Fall is a good time to add manure, compost, or leaf mold to garden soils for increasing organic matter content.
- Monitor plants for spider mite activity. Reduce their numbers by hosing off with a forceful spray of water.
- Seasonal loss of inner needles on conifers is normal at this time. It may be especially noticeable on pines.

- Missouri Botanical Garden -

UPCOMING EVENTS

September 6: Salt River Master Gardeners, 6 pm, Palmyra Sesquicentennial Bldg.

September 12: Fabius Master Gardener club meeting, 6:30 at Smith Park.

September 13: Sullivan County Master Gardener meeting, Jacob’s Vineyard and Winery, Kirksville.

September 13: Magic City Master Gardener meeting, 6:30, harvest dinner.

September: Heartland Master Gardeners, no meeting scheduled.

September 20: Kirksville Area Master Gardeners, 7 pm. Watch for emails with info.

September 26: Macon-Shelby Master Gardener meeting, 7 pm, Extension Center.


October 11-24: Permaculture Design Course. For information contact John or Holly Arbuckle at 660-332-4020, or email me for a flyer and more information.

Garden Talk!

Jennifer Schutter, University of Missouri Extension Horticulture Specialist
503 E. Northtown Road, Kirksville, MO 63501-1999
schutterjl@missouri.edu 660-665-9866