

REMEMBER YOUR YARD AND GARDEN

Fall yard work lays foundation for spring

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As temperatures fall, we roll our lawnmowers into the garage, stow our gardening tools and say good-bye to our yards until spring. Or not.

Fall, say landscapers and garden gurus, is prime time for laying the foundation for a lush and bountiful spring. Landscaper Greg McLaughlin has spent years getting to know the ebbs and flows of the seasons and coaxing the best out of each. Fall, he said, has its own to-do list.

Fertilizing in the fall

"Fall fertilization of your lawn and plants is important," McLaughlin said. "It's one that a lot of people miss — they think more of spring."

Many of the benefits of fertilizing in autumn are hidden underground until the weather warms again.

"You don't want a lot of top growth and you won't get it during the winter, but fall fertilization gives the lawn and plants a chance to develop root growth," he said.

Generally, October and November are good months to apply slow-release, low-nitrogen fertilizers. Stick to the winter blends, he said.

"You don't want a huge flush of growth that can be damaged," McLaughlin advised. "If you stimulate too much growth, it's more exposed for freeze damage."

Sprinkler systems

In colder climates, experts advise winterizing irrigation systems by draining or blowing out the pipes with an air compressor. No one wants the damage caused by water freezing inside the system.

McLaughlin says the deed doesn't need to be done before the first freeze. His landscapers generally start winterizing clients' systems about the end of October.

"People get nervous when it gets near freezing," he said, "but



STAFF PHOTO BY KATHY ANEY

Steve Malcom, of McLaughlin Landscaping, weeds a client's flowerbed in early October. As the weather grows colder, he will move on to fertilizing, pruning and weatherizing sprinkler systems.

a quick freeze isn't generally a problem. It has to get into the low 20s or high teens for a number of days for cold to penetrate into the ground far enough to cause damage."

Soil, he said, is a good insulator. Faucets that aren't frost-free, however, are a little more at risk. Remember to use shut-off valves to keep water out of those vulnerable faucets.

Homeowners can blow the water out of their systems with air compressors or hire professionals if they don't want the headache. McLaughlin's crew removes water from irrigation system with a large-capacity compressor on a trailer.

Draining can be accomplished manually, too. Some systems have manual drain valves installed at the lowest point in the network of pipes.

McLaughlin advised turning

off the sprinkler clock in your system's control box for the winter, but not unplugging. Spending a tiny amount on electricity, pennies really, saves one from having to reprogram the system in the spring.

To prune or not to prune?

Fall can be a good for light pruning and removal of deadwood. Such pruning, McLaughlin said, can lead to vigorous bursts of new growth in the spring. After the plants go dormant in fall, the leaves have dropped off and the structure of the tree or shrub is easily seen.

However, "don't prune in freezing temperatures," he said. "That can damage the plant."

There are different schools of thought on pruning roses, McLaughlin said. His employees prune to about two feet in height. Pruning removes the deadwood, improves air circulation and can improve the plant's shape.

Protect vulnerable plants

Last winter, a freeze on the heels of unseasonably warm temperatures spelled doom for hundreds of trees and shrubs in Umatilla County. The mid-November freeze came at a time when plants hadn't yet done their gradual shut-down, and their cambium layers were still full of moisture. Roses and other vulnerable shrubs were especially hard-hit. Probably a quarter of the roses in Pendleton, McLaughlin said, fell victim.

"It's helpful to mulch around roses," he said. "It gives them more protection. They are a little touchier plant in our climate."

Any plants that took a hit from last year's freeze, he said, would benefit from mulching.

Plants in planters or raised beds are even more at risk of dying in a winter freeze.

"Bring those plants inside or protect them," he said.

Fall lawn care tips

The following are some tips from Popular Mechanics for fall lawn care.

Keep mowing: Continue to water and mow your lawn, as needed, throughout the fall. Drop the mower blade to its lowest setting for the last two cuttings of the year. That will allow more sunlight to reach the crown of the grass, and there will be less leaf to turn brown during the winter.

***Note:** As you lower the blade, just remember not to trim off more than one-third of the grass blades at any one time. If necessary, gradually lower the cutting height until the time of the final two cuttings.

Aerate the soil: Aerate your lawn so that oxygen, water and fertilizer can easily reach the grass' roots.

Rake the leaves: It's important to remove fallen leaves from your lawn as soon as possible. Don't wait until all the leaves have fallen to start raking. Leaves will become wet from rain and morning dew, stick together and form an impenetrable mat that will suffocate the grass and breed fungal diseases.

An alternative to raking leaves is to use a lawnmower fitted with a collection bag or vacuum system.

Fertilize: If you fertilize your lawn only once a year, do it in the fall. Grass leaves grow much more slowly as the weather turns cool, but the grass roots and rhizomes continue to grow quickly. A fall application of fertilizer delivers essential nutrients for the grass to grow deep roots now and to keep nutrients on reserve for spring.

Wait until mid-to-late fall, then apply a dry lawn fertilizer. For optimum coverage, use a walk-behind drop spreader.

Fill bald spots: The quickest, easiest way to do this is with an all-in-one lawn repair mixture. Sold at most garden shops and home centers, this ready-to-use mixture contains grass seed, a special quick-starter lawn fertilizer, and organic mulch.

Use a garden rake to scratch loose the soil at the bald spot in your lawn. Then spread a thick layer of the lawn repair mixture over the area. Lightly compact the mixture, then water thoroughly and continue to water every other day for two weeks.

Weed control: Weeds, like most plants, are in the energy-absorbing mode during the fall. Apply herbicide now and the weeds won't return in the spring. Read label before use. Most manufacturers recommend applying weed killer during early-to-mid autumn, when daytime temperatures are consistently above 60 degrees.

SOURCE: PopularMechanics.com

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Place
TO BE*

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