

Winterizing Your Lawn

Finally! The heat is now behind us. It is one thing to live in the South Georgia heat; it is another to work in it. I hate hot weather. I should not say much about cold since I have not lived up North. But I love winter. Maybe my opinion would change if I lived through a winter in the snow. I scouted too many cotton and peanut fields in the sun this summer. Let me say that it is very hard to concentrate on a field problem when you are soaking wet from head to toe – and it is NOT raining. That is my rant for the day. Cold air, you are welcome. It is now time to move our attention from the past and on to what is next.

We need to start thinking about the change in seasons. This is the time we focus on winterizing our lawns. I've been getting lots of questions on weed control. This is a good time to treat weeds in the lawn and also prepare for future winter weeds. Here are a few pointers as you finish your lawn maintenance for the season.

WEED CONTROL

Annual weeds germinate from seeds, produce seeds, and die in one season. There are summer annuals, like Southern crabgrass, and winter annuals, such as annual bluegrass. Winter annuals are adapted to cool temperatures of fall, winter and spring, as summer annuals are adapted to warmer temperatures.

Herbicides are used to control existing weeds (Post-emergence) and weeds prior to germination (pre-emergence). Early October is a good time to apply pre-emergent herbicides, such as Atrazine, to your lawn for control of your winter weeds. Atrazine provides pre-emergent of weeds in St. Augustine, Centipede, and Zoysia and will kill existing weeds. Always remember to follow the label when using pesticides as timing and rates differ with different brand names.

FERTILIZATION

Do not fertilize your lawn! Roots and shoots (blades) of turf grow throughout the summer. As temperatures cool, the lawn goes into a state of suspended growth – dormancy. When fertilizer is applied to a lawn before the turf “shuts down”, it physiologically disturbs the grass. Nitrogen causes a vegetative growth while the roots are slowing down. Problems associated with late fertilization are believed to correspond with Centipedegrass decline. Late fertilizing also provides a better environment for disease.

Allow your lawn to enter dormancy and do not fertilize until it is fully greened up in the spring. The last fertilization you do in the summer should be six weeks before the first frost. For us, the first frost is usually November. It is not a good idea to fertilize after mid-September.

OVER-SEEDING

It is common for athletic fields and high utilized turfgrass to be over-seeded with a cool season grass for the winter. For homeowners, one advantage is aesthetics – having a green lawn throughout the winter. Cool season grasses grow at temperatures of 60 to 75 degrees F. Annual and perennial ryegrass is a common selection for overseeding. A good time to over-seed is when nights are cooling into the 50's, and day time temperatures are in the 70's. Temperatures often fluctuate in the fall so in general a good time to over-seed is early November.

However, not every lawn needs to be over-seeded. One disadvantage of over-seeding is the cost of seed. Another disadvantage is mowing throughout the winter. We must also be mindful when our warm season turf is trying to come back in the spring. During “green-up”, warm season turf (Centipede, St. Augustine) is low on nutrient reserves and spends much of those reserves waking up from winter. Temperatures that make warm season grass come out of dormancy also make the over-seeded ryegrass flourish. This results in competition for nutrients, water, and light.

With normal mowing and as spring turns to summer, the cool season grass will eventually die. Herbicides can also be used to kill the cool season grass and allow the warm season turf to be competition free once again.