



# Fall Healthy Lawn Care Tips

While most people know that spring and summer are important seasons for taking care of their lawns, did you know that the fall is just as important? Here are a few tips for fall lawn care that will help keep your lawn healthy all year long and will help protect water quality.

## Mowing Your Lawn

Three inches is the rule! Keep your lawn three inches high during the fall. It will help hold moisture in the plant, reduce stress and shade out weeds. You can make your last cut slightly shorter if you expect the grass to grow after the final cut. Avoid dumping grass clippings down storm drains or in waterways. Yard waste that finds its way into waterways can cause significant changes in nutrient levels, leading to poor water quality. Clip 1/3 of the blade and leave your clippings on your lawn. You'll need 1/3 less fertilizer if you leave clippings on your lawn!

## Mulch Your Leaves

Did you know that leaves can help enrich your lawn's soil? Those colorful leaf "bits" provide much-needed organic matter for your soil. As leaves fall onto your lawn, chip the leaves into smaller pieces by running over them several times with your lawn mower.

If you chose not to mulch your leaves, place them in your garden beds as mulch or follow the instructions for leaf collection provided by your municipality. Be sure to keep leaves away from storm drains and out of waterways.

## Feed in the Fall

Fall is generally the most important time of the year for applying fertilizers. Be sure to test your soil if you haven't done so recently and use your soil test results to determine proper application rates. Over fertilizing is worse for your lawn and the environment than under fertilizing. If you haven't tested your soil -- do it now! Contact your local Cooperative Extension Service office.

If you fertilize once or twice a year, your fall fertilization should take place in September. If you fertilize three or four times a year, you will have two fall treatments-the first just after Labor Day and the second, just before the ground freezes; typically mid-November.

The Clinton River Watershed Council promotes the fertilizer recommendations set by the South Oakland County Healthy Lawn and Garden Technical Committee and the Partners for Clean Water recommend the following types of fertilizer:

- Low or no phosphorus. (5:1 Nitrogen to Phosphorus ratio)
- Slow- release nitrogen (At least 50% of the nitrogen should be slow release. Avoid quick-release and water-soluble fertilizers.)
- Pesticide/herbicide free (Separate, spot treatment is recommended.)

Remember to leave a 10-25 ft buffer between where you fertilize and any lake, river, stream or open drain. For information on which brands are available in SE Michigan and where to purchase them, contact the CRWC office.

*For more information, contact the Clinton River Watershed Council  
101 Main St. Suite 100 Rochester, MI 48307  
248-601-0606; [www.clintonriver.org](http://www.clintonriver.org)*

### Help Your Lawn "Breathe"

A part of having healthy lawns and healthy waterways is having a lawn that allows air, water and nutrients to reach down into the soil. Air is needed by organisms that help to break down organic matter and produce nutrients that the grass roots need. Having less compacted soil will also allow water to soak into the ground and help plant roots grow stronger and deeper into the soil.

You can help your lawn "breathe" by either renting or having your landscape company use a core aerator on your lawn, and fall is the perfect season to do this.

### Time to Patch

Seed or sod bare patches of lawn to prevent soil from washing into our lakes and streams and to keep the soil from becoming compacted. When re-seeding your lawn, loosen the soil in the area with a rake or hoe, apply a thin layer of compost, and then apply the appropriate variety of grass seed and water evenly and regularly. Consider covering the newly seeded spots with straw or another product that will help hold moisture in and protect the seeds from being discovered by wildlife. If you are repairing or replacing large areas of lawn, consider using grass varieties that require less water and fertilizer. Or, consider filling the spot with a native tree, shrub or perennials!

### Pest and Weed Problems

Homeowners that follow healthy lawn care practices will have fewer weed and pest problems. If you must treat for weeds or other pest problems, make sure you know exactly what plant or pest you are trying to eliminate and use a product designed to treat that specific problem. Also, make sure you are treating for the problem during the appropriate time of year. Many insects and fungi are very important to maintaining a healthy lawn. Broad-spectrum pesticides end up killing the problem pests and the helpful ones.

Remember to maintain a 10-25 foot buffer along waterways where you do not use pesticides body and spot treat when ever possible. Consider using a corn gluten product to treat for broadleaf weeds. It should be used in the fall and in the spring just after the forscythia bloom. In addition to being a natural product that serves as a pre-emergent it is also a natural, slow-release nitrogen fertilizer.

### Cut Back In Spring, Not Fall

Many perennial plants and ornamental grasses provide vital fall and winter food sources and shelter for native wildlife through the winter. They also provide "visual interest," in your landscape and protect soil from wind erosion. Consider leaving these plants standing instead of cutting them back in the fall. Those that need to be cut to promote new growth can be cut back in the spring.

### Mulch!

If your mulch is a little thin or absent, add more to flower beds and any other areas where grass and weeds are unwanted. Three inches of double-shredded hardwood or shredded leaf mulch will also help to retain soil moisture, prevent soil erosion, and enhance soil quality.

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