

# Fall Lawn Care

By Jason Miller

November 11, 2008



## A few simple steps will help your lawn weather the winter.

With winter just a handful of weeks away, now is a good time to make sure your lawn is properly prepared to brave the elements. Why not take a moment to assess how well your lawn is performing and take the first steps toward a good maintenance program. Like all gardening, lawn care requires ongoing effort, but the results can be a home surrounded by natural beauty.

The rain is coming, so your first order of business should be to get the lawn mowed. Mow your grass at a height of around 2½ inches, which should be low enough to look good and not provide a haven for excessive moisture, which can create a sort of petri dish for fungal growth in the form of mushrooms and/or rust. A mower that mulches lawn clippings is recommended in Western Washington as the mulch actually feeds the lawn. However, while summer mulching is recommended, fall mulching is not, because thatch will accumulate as the weather turns cool and wet. So bag those clippings and compost them.

Next, have a soil test done to determine what nutrients your lawn may require, and apply fertilizer accordingly. A soil test can save money in fertilizer costs and prevent over- or under-fertilizing. Contact the WSU Master Gardeners through your WSU Skagit County Extension office (360-428-4270) for more information about soil testing. Nitrogen may be the only nutrient that a lawn needs and to determine this, a soil test is necessary. Other common nutrients that lawns may need are phosphorous, potassium and lime. Lime does not remove moss but does supply calcium.

If your soil requires fertilizer, applying it in the fall is a great idea. Corn gluten meal is an organic choice that provides a good dose of nitrogen while helping to prevent weed seeds from germinating. Synthetic fertilizers will also do the job, but if you choose one of these, use a low-phosphorous one: Look for a middle nutrient-level number of 3 or below on the fertilizer package. For



**Concrete resident Eric Parks mows his lawn for the last time in late October, cutting it shorter than he does during the warmer months. “I cut it high all summer long, so this year I only had to water it once, when it got really hot,” he said. Photo by Jason Miller.**

lawns requiring nitrogen, apply one pound of nitrogen-rich fertilizer for every 1,000 square feet, in late November. If your lawn is composed of Kentucky bluegrass and/or perennial rye grass, you'll need to up the dose to six pounds for every 1,000 square feet.

In this part of the country, it's not likely that you'll need to water your lawn this fall, but if by chance we experience a dry spell as winter approaches, and if the forecast calls for more of the same, go ahead and help your lawn over the hump with a light watering.

Be careful when you're watering, though, because overwatering can be harmful to a lawn since nutrients are leached away and wet soil causes roots to seek oxygen at the surface. By observation and feel, you can determine if water is needed. Look carefully and frequently at the grass. A bluish-green color shows lack of water. Failure of the grass to spring back when pressed down also indicates a need for water. Checking the soil by hand at the roots for drying indicates the watering need. If you must water, follow these general rules:

- Apply only enough water to wet the root zone
- Apply water slowly to maximize absorption and prevent runoff
- Water only in the early morning hours so that your lawn has a chance to dry out during the day, or you'll only be shooting yourself in the foot by creating a cool, damp area in which fungus, mildew, and other diseases can get a foothold

A beautiful lawn is desirable and possible. An ongoing program of mowing, fertilizing and watering can reduce thatch, pests and weeds and can save money and time. For more info see EB 0482 Home Lawns ([www.pubs.wsu.edu](http://www.pubs.wsu.edu))