

Winterizing Lawns

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Every fall, many homeowners ask themselves, “Do I really need to help my lawn prepare itself for winter?” The presence of pallets stacked high with winterizing products in stores by late August would seem to imply that the answer is yes. This article answers questions that should help to clarify this subject.

1. Are winterizing products appropriate for all types of turf?

Both cool and warm season turfgrasses grow in South Carolina and most of these products do not differentiate between the two. Fescue is a cool season grass and grows best in cool temperatures. This time of year, you should begin fertilizing fescue with regular lawn fertilizer according to soil test results. Winterizing applies only to warm-season grasses such as centipede, St. Augustine, bermuda, and zoysia.

2. Should I apply a product high in nitrogen to my warm-season turf in the fall?

It is alright to lightly apply nitrogen in the late summer and fall as long as the application is at least four weeks before the first average frost date. For centipede lawns, extend this time frame to eight weeks. A light application means one-half to one pound of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet of lawn. To determine how much of a product contains one pound of nitrogen, divide the first number in the analysis (10-10-10, for example) into 100. The result is the number of pounds of the product that contains 1 pound of nitrogen.

When applied too late and too heavily to warm season turfgrasses, nitrogen fertilizer will promote shoot growth at the same time the plant’s metabolism is slowing. This results in a depletion of carbohydrates and stress on the plant. The new, tender shoots are also less tolerant of cold temperatures. Furthermore, the additional nitrogen would be available to cool season weeds.

3. Should I apply other nutrients to the lawn in the fall?

Potassium has been shown to enhance cold tolerance of turfgrasses. If a soil test indicates that your soil is low in potassium, it can be applied at a rate of one pound of potash per 1,000 square feet of lawn. Materials available include fertilizers low in nitrogen such as a 5-10-30, or muriate of potash (use 1.6 pounds per 1,000 square feet), or potassium sulfate (use two pounds per 1,000 square feet). However, if your lawn has been fertilized throughout the summer with fertilizers containing potassium, it’s unlikely a fall application would be helpful.

4. Are there other ways to help a warm season lawn prepare for winter?

One way is to increase sunlight to the turf. Turf in shaded areas stays cold longer and produces fewer carbohydrates due to reduced photosynthesis. Carbohydrates are needed for increased cold tolerance. Although it’s too late this season, another way is to loosen compacted soils through aerating or other means.

Compacted soils are colder than well drained areas. Lastly, raising the mowing height in late summer will not only promote deep rooting but will leave more leaf tissue which will produce more carbohydrates.

In summary, a lawn that has been well maintained throughout the summer is prepared for winter. If you are concerned, follow the recommendations above and submit a soil sample to your local Extension office. Among other helpful information, the report will include potassium levels of your soil.