

Garden practice

Autumn lawn care

Investing time in autumn lawn care will pay dividends next spring and summer with a greener, lusher and more resilient sward

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RHS/NEIL HEPWORTH



Trim lawn edges.



Apply autumn lawn feed using an applicator.



Water-in newly laid turf.

As the Good Book says, there is a season for every activity – and September is the perfect time to breathe new life back into your lawn. The warmth of summer is still held in the soil, and the moisture in the air means changes and repairs made now have time to bed in before temperatures drop and growth stops.

Autumn lawn care's purpose is to create conditions that favour the grass, and to encourage a dense sward able to cope with wear and block out weeds.

Not all lawns are equal: the soil type in your garden plays a big part in the sward's ability to stay healthy, and affects the remedial work appropriate to keep it in good condition. Heavy clays are prone to compaction, but will keep a lawn lush for longer in dry weather. Grass on sandy, free-draining soil withstands more wear, but without irrigation is quick to yellow in dry weather, leaving gaps for windblown weeds to establish. Similarly, grass growing over worm-rich loam is also weed-prone, as worm casts offer a ideal seedbed (especially once flattened by the mower).

Before tackling autumn lawn repairs, cut the grass with mower blades set low to expose any areas of weak growth. If topdressing or overseeding, mow twice in different directions beforehand, to catch any grass blades laying flat on the soil.

Work in sequence

Choose which maintenance jobs you need to do to your lawn, because they are best done in logical order. Begin by dealing with mounds and low spots if necessary, then scarify, aerate, topdress, feed, kill weeds and moss, and finally edge.

The dividends of autumn lawn care, though not immediately obvious, will be most apparent the following spring and summer. ●

More from the RHS For an autumn lawn care video, and advice on turf care for all seasons, search 'Lawn care' at www.rhs.org.uk

Lawn care event at Hyde Hall p90

Lawn treatments



Feeding

Unlike nitrogen-rich spring and summer fertilisers that encourage rapid but 'soft' growth, autumn lawn feeds are high in phosphates and potash to promote strong roots and increase the health and hardiness of the grass before winter.

There are liquid and solid formulations; all must be carefully applied, as using stronger than recommended rates can 'scorch' grass. Many formulations should not be used on grass that has had less than six months to establish. Apply solid fertilisers either by broadcasting from a garden trowel or using a wheeled applicator (above).

Apply the feed just before rain is forecast or water in afterwards to wash feed from leaves and minimise scorching. Weed-and-feed formulations for autumn are also available. Take care to keep these away from plants in borders – as well as from paving and driveways, for many formulae can stain.



Topdressing

Spread topdressing to encourage strong roots, thicken the sward and help flatten out shallow divots. Topdressings are often applied after aerating a lawn with a fork or hollow-tine aerator (see opposite).

Garden centres sell ready-mixed formulations to apply at 2–3kg per sq m (3¾–5½ lb per sq yd), but you can make your own custom mix tailored to suit your soil:

- ❖ **Heavy clays and sticky silts:** mix six parts of sharp sand with three of sieved loam, and one part of leafmould or coir.
- ❖ **Soils prone to dry out:** make the mix 1:4:2 parts of sand, loam and coir respectively.
- ❖ **Average garden soils:** most respond well to a 2:4:1 mix.

Whatever the mix, spread the topdressing over the ground from a spade or wheeled applicator, working it into holes using the back of a garden rake or a brush. Ensure that the top of the mown grass sticks up through the mix.



Killing mosses

Chemical mosskillers such as 'lawn sand' (ferrous sulphate mixed with sharp sand) are the traditional way to get rid of moss. Scatter from a trowel for spot treatments, or with a wheeled applicator for large lawns, in dry weather. Some formulations need watering in; to avoid 'scorch', do not over-dose. After two weeks moss turns black and is ready to rake out. Compost this with dead leaves and scrunched-up paper to help it rot down quickly.

A non-chemical alternative is MO Bacter, a granular organic fertiliser that encourages rapid moss growth which is then mown off. Bacteria can then kill what remains without the need to scarify. Moss thrives where grass struggles: dense shade, and on nutrient-poor, badly drained, compacted soils. If these underlying causes are not dealt with, moss will return.

Mosskillers combined with autumn feed are not suitable for recently sown grass.

Dealing with low and high spots

Dips and mower-blade-catching mounds that end up being 'scalped' bald of sward can appear as a relatively new lawn surface settles, or on older lawns if conditions change – as is often the case when a tree or large shrub has been removed nearby. Fix such areas by cutting an 'X' across the area and use a spade to slice under and fold back the turf. Fork over the exposed earth, adding or removing more soil as necessary, then firm and check the repair is level before closing the turf, tamping it down and watering well.



Petrol-powered scarifiers make quick work of larger lawns.

Scarifying (thatch removal)

If you do nothing else, scarifying – the process of giving a lawn a vigorous comb with a spring-tined lawn rake – makes the biggest difference to the health of your lawn. As the rake scrapes through the sward, it breaks up the soil surface and divides tufts of grass, encouraging fresh regrowth from runners and sideshoots that thicken up the lawn.

Scarifying removes the dense layer of dead grass or 'thatch' that naturally builds up beneath the green shoots of mown grass. If thicker than 1cm (¾in), thatch inhibits the movement of air, water and nutrients to the roots. Because the surface is slow to drain, turf is more prone to fungal diseases.

Work in lines across the lawn, collecting the thatch as you go (the amount you get is always staggering). This is easier than working backwards, dragging increasing amounts of weighty thatch with you. Alternatively, hire an electric or petrol-powered scarifier to do the hard work for you. Add the collected thatch on the compost heap. Scarify, then remove before feeding, aerating, topdressing or overseeding.



Scarifying with a metal spring-tine rake.

Aerating

The soil beneath heavily used play areas, paths and direct routes across lawns often becomes compacted and airless. A sure sign is when the ground sits wet after rain, or grass becomes patchy during summer. In over-compacted soil, the soil microbial ecosystem struggles, roots become shallow and it is hard for grass to find enough nutrients and moisture in the airless conditions. Unless addressed, even fresh turf laid on top of such soil will turn up its toes.

In most cases a garden fork pushed into the grass 15cm (6in) deep, spaced 15cm (6in) apart across the lawn is the solution. Wiggle the handle back and forth to loosen the earth, and work backwards across the area so you can see where you have been.

If poor drainage is the root cause, follow up by brushing sharp sand (see 'topdressing', left) into the holes before the soil settles. Aerate problem patches every autumn – but for typical, moderately-used lawns, every two to three years should be enough.

On soils prone to compaction, hollow-tine aeration helps enormously. Instead of simply making a hole, hand-held or motorised machines remove closely spaced plugs of earth, making room for a free-draining topdressing to be brushed into the surface.

With annual hollow-tining, the make-up of the soil beneath a lawn can be changed to the good in only a few years, but for most gardens it should only be necessary every three or four years (and then only if drainage is a problem).



Hollow-tine aerators cut vertical holes and remove plugs of soil.

Edging

Cut lawn edges with a spade or half-moon edger (right) for a smart finish. Create a gully 10cm (4in) deep to separate lawn and borders – it defines the edge, stops grass spreading into borders and makes it easier to clip edges with shears. If plants have flopped onto a lawn, grass on the edge may die. Repair by cutting out and lifting a square of turf around the dead patch. Rotate it to give a crisp edge (the damaged area furthest from the border); top up the soil, and return or reseed.



Overseeding

Where grass is sparse, break up the soil surface with a rake and sow seed at half the rate recommended for new lawns. Gently rake the seed in. Cover with horticultural fleece to keep birds at bay, and in dry weather water with an overhead sprinkler. Lawns are made up of different grass selections and the colour of overseeded areas may not match the old. To disguise repairs, overseed the whole area or blur the edges by lightly sowing into the surrounding grass. Alternatively, collect thin strips of turf produced by edging and grow on as repair patches.





Mowing heights

Many gardeners seem confused over getting their mowing heights right:

- ❖ For the first spring mowing, set the cutting height to the highest setting, gradually reducing the height of cut until the desired height is reached.
- ❖ Fine lawns are cut to 6-13mm (¼-½in); ordinary ornamental lawns 13-25mm (½-1in) in summer, up to 40mm (1½in) in spring and autumn.
- ❖ As a rule of thumb, never remove more than one-third of the length of the grass blades in any one mow.
- ❖ Excessively close mowing can be attractive, but may weaken the grass, encourage shallow rooting and make



the turf prone to drought, weeds and moss. Close-mown lawns need more feed and water, and bare patches can be 'scalped'.

- ❖ Grass regularly cut too high can become weak and will be less durable.

Grass-free lawns?

Alternatives to turf

UNIVERSITY OF READING



At the University of Reading, RHS-sponsored PhD student Lionel

Smith (above) has been researching low-growing, flower-rich and diverse plant communities that are alternatives to turf lawns.

Low maintenance and wildlife friendly, they need no feed and less water than lawn grasses, and are cut much less frequently. Mowing can be reduced by two-thirds - three to nine times a year, compared with 20-30 times for a grass lawn - but is still important to help maintain a balance in plant vigour.

Low-growing perennials that spread by stolons, rhizomes or adventitious roots such as daisies, clover, yarrow, *Ajuga* (bugle) and buttercups are best.

Different blends of plants can be tailored to suit particular conditions, such as dry soils or shade. Most can be walked on occasionally, but are less hard-wearing than grass swards.

Trial plots have flowered for 9-12 months. Lionel's research is almost complete; his results will be covered in a future issue of *The Garden*.

- ❖ A 200sq m (2,100sq ft) public floral lawn can be seen at Avondale Park, Walmer Road, London W11 4PQ.

- ❖ More information at: www.grassfreelawns.co.uk



RHS/SARAH CUTTLE

Grass-free lawn at RHS Chelsea Flower Show.

Creating a new lawn

There are two main ways of establishing a new lawn - seed or turf. Soil preparation is the same: dig or rotovate the soil to a spade's depth, breaking up clods and picking out stones, roots and debris. If replacing a threadbare lawn on a light soil, add a soil-improver such as composted green waste (around a bucketful per sq m/sq yd) to improve water retention.

Even-out undulations with a spade, rake, then tread the area with the flats of your shoes. Rake again, up and down and then across the lawn. The best time to check if the levels are right is in the evening, when long shadows make any undulations easier to spot.

- ❖ Seed is the most economical option and establishes best if autumn sown, but kept watered can also take well in spring. 'Family', 'shade' and 'drought-tolerant' grass blends are available. Weigh out the seed recommended to cover 1sq m and sow that amount onto a marked-out 1 x 1m of soil as a reference to the sowing density; then broadcast-sow the rest of the area at that rate. Lightly rake, and water with a fine overhead sprinkler. Mow when the grass reaches 5cm (2in).

- ❖ Turf can be laid at any time, bar when the ground is frozen. It is more expensive than seed but gives an instant effect. Plan delivery so the turf does not stay rolled up for more than a couple of days. Work from planks to protect the raked soil. Lay turves with the ends staggered so joints (which tend to dry) do not line up. Water well for the first few weeks, and mow after a fortnight with blades set high.



Tread or roll raked-over soil (top) before laying turf. Work from a plank (above). Stagger the edges where turves meet (right), and trim for a neat edge.

