

Get your Grass in Shape for Next Year

Repair & Renovate Turf without Polluting Local Waterbodies

By Jaimy George, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County

Summer comes and goes, as do the lawns we've labored over all summer. As you move towards retiring the lawn mower for the season, you may want to spend some time getting your grass in shape for next year. Early fall is the best time of year to give your lawn the boost or makeover it needs to start off healthy and weed free next spring. When making improvements to a lawn, it's important to plan carefully. Poorly planned renovations to the lawn may leave soil bare and exposed. Without protection from a thick layer of grass, loose soils and fertilizers are likely to wash down storm drains or ditches, where they eventually drain to and pollute local lakes, rivers and streams. There are, however, many ways that homeowners can spruce up their lawns without compromising the health of local water bodies.

Before applying fertilizers to your lawn, test your soil to find out if fertilizer is even needed. A soil test will tell you how much (if any) phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) fertilizer your lawn needs. If tests indicate that no P or K is needed, use nitrogen fertilizer sources that contain little or no P and K.

Though spring brings thoughts of lush green grass, it is not usually the best time to add fertilizer to your lawn. The bulk of the fertilizer applied to any lawn should come between the months of August and November. Fertilizing healthy lawn in the spring increases top growth at the expense of root growth, making the plant more susceptible to drought, insects and diseases such as rust. You'll also have to keep up with all that top growth by mowing more! Fertilizing in the fall encourages root growth, and gives grass a head start against weeds and plant diseases in the spring. For most low-maintenance lawns, a single application in fall about two weeks after the last mowing is sufficient.

How you apply fertilizer is just as important as when you apply it. Not all applicators are the same. Rotary spreaders cover a wider area, but they can also spread fertilizer onto streets and driveways, where they may be washed into local water bodies. Though drop spreaders may take longer, they put the fertilizer exactly where you want it. Be careful loading the spreader and sweep up any spills to avoid pollution problems. To prevent runoff, avoid applying fertilizer when the ground is saturated or frozen.

If your lawn is more than fifty percent weeds, it might be time for more serious measures! For lawns in need of an extensive makeover, fall is the ideal time to re-seed or renovate in most of NY. This is because temperatures are cool, weeds are fewer and moisture levels are good. Planning is essential to make sure that loose soils (and grass seeds) that are exposed during the renovation process don't end up in local waterbodies.

To prevent erosion and retain moisture, cover exposed soils with mulch. Use weed free straw or marsh hay to avoid weed seeds. You can also try wood fibers, excelsior, newsprint and other erosion control blankets. Products made from pelletized newsprint and H₂O absorbing gel such as Penn Mulch are also effective.

You can find more detailed information on fertilizing, mulching and landscaping with an eye to water quality at the Cornell University gardening website:

<http://www.gardening.cornell.edu/lawn/index.html>.