

Fall Landscaping Tips to Prepare for Winter

There is no better time to take stock of your lawn and landscaping needs than during the shorter days and crisp temperatures that herald the beginning of fall. Not only can it help you have a great-looking lawn next spring, but it can save you money on your utility bills during the winter.

Assess Your Lawn

Fall is a great time for new grass seed to take root, especially in cooler climates. Even with meticulous care, lawns can thin out and lose color due to excessive thatch buildup, hard or compacted soils, or periods of high temperature, high humidity, or drought. Compacted soils slowly reduce the amount of oxygen contained in the soil, delaying the penetration of water and nutrients and impeding the lawn growth.

Aerating and over-seeding is an effective treatment to control thatch, reduce compaction, fill in bare spots and revitalize growth. It also reduces water runoff, increases the lawn's drought tolerance and improves its overall health.

Lawn aeration allows air, moisture and fertilizer to penetrate down to the root zone. It involves removing small soil plugs or cores typically 1/2 to 3/4 inch in diameter from the lawn. Lawns composed of cool-season grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass are best aerified in the fall, when there is less heat stress and danger of invasion by weedy annuals. On the other hand, warm-season grasses are best aerified in late spring and summer, when they are actively growing.

Consider also reseeding your lawn in areas where the grass has gotten sparse. First, rake leaves and debris off your lawn so the seeds can penetrate the soil. Then fertilize your lawn one last time with a high nitrogen fertilizer to encourage root growth. Make sure you get a lawn fertilizer that is labeled "winterizing."

Energy-Saving Planting

Fall is also the best season for planting trees, shrubs and perennials. Plants planted in the fall benefit from cooler air temperatures, not to mention soil temperatures still warm enough to support good root growth. After a winter of dormancy, fall-planted trees and shrubs practically shoot out of the soil the following spring.

Plant deciduous trees that lose their leaves during the winter in front of windows that receive significant amounts of sunlight. This helps block solar heat in the summer and lets it in during the winter when you need it most, which could help reduce your heating and air conditioning costs.

A six-foot to eight-foot deciduous tree will begin shading your windows the first year and your roof, depending on the species, within five-10 years. In this region where snow is very common in cold months, planting evergreen trees or shrubs limits can serve as a windbreak and barrier for snow piles.

Winter sunlight is a welcome heat source, but the wind that can accompany it can reduce its positive effects. A natural windbreak will reduce or redirect wind speed. Evergreen trees and shrubs planted on the side of your house that receives winds will help reduce the wind effect. Teaming evergreen trees and an earth berm, a natural or man-made wall, will direct wind over your house. Additionally, in snowy climates windbreaks will help keep snow away from your home's foundation.