

# BEST Lawns Newsletter

Late Fall 2020 Edition

Virginia Cooperative Extension-Prince William Unit



All content was written by Natali Walker, and is based on university research at Virginia Tech, Virginia State and other partner universities in the Land Grant system.

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## Leaving the Leaves: “Leave” Them Alone

As day length shortens and temperatures cool, the colorful leaves start dropping from deciduous trees, forming a colorful blanket on the ground in many parts of the Northern Hemisphere. With the first sight of leaves on the ground comes the early morning buzzing sound of leaf blowers, especially after a rainy or windy fall day when more leaves have dropped. Weekend yard work this time of year consists of many homeowners blowing off, vacuuming or raking up almost every single leaf in the yard to reveal their flawless green turf. Common is the sight of trash bags full of unwanted leaves sitting on the curb, waiting to be hauled off to the landfill.

Yes, having a very thick and wet layer of leaves can block sunlight reducing turf growth and can increase the potential for turf disease, but fret not! If you have a mulching mower and/or a rotary mower, mulching the leaves back into the turf is an environmentally friendly practice and a way to manage leaves without impacting the turf. A report from Perdue University, “*The Role of Tree Leaf Mulch and Nitrogen Fertilizer on Turfgrass Soil Quality*” reported that mulching the leaves had no undesirable effects on turfgrass quality or color, growth, thatch accumulation, soil pH, weed populations or disease pressure.

Consider safety first! A rotary mower can be used for leaf mulching but is not recommended as a stump grinder or chipper/shredder. In addition, remove sticks and tree limbs before mulching so you or someone else will not get hit by flying debris. It is also recommended to wear a face mask and goggles to protect against debris. Also consider if there was a rain event as the leaves might be too wet. Wet leaves can increase the strain on your mower’s engine and won’t chop up the leaves into small pieces that can easily decompose into the soil.

Remember that there is only so much leaf material that your mower can handle at once. Michigan State University says that a depth of up to 6 inches of leaves can be successfully mulched at a time, but it varies depending on the size and performance of your mower. To thoroughly chop up the leaves, multiple passes may be required. Got dandelions and crabgrass in your lawn? According to MSU there was also a reduction in dandelions and crabgrass over time as the mulched leaves covered voids in the turf where weeds would germinate in the future.

Don’t have a mower and want to help wildlife over the colder months? Instead of mulching the leaves, why not leave the leaves for our wildlife friends. Leaf litter provides wildlife habitat for many critters such as: turtles, toads, birds, mammals and invertebrates. They use this leaf litter material for food, shelter and nesting material. Butterfly and moth species rely on the protection of fallen leaves for overwintering. If having a perfect lawn is a priority or the HOA requires no leaves, consider piling up the leaves, branches, sticks and stems in an out of the way area in the yard. This will provide shelter for the animal’s while also keeping unwanted material out of the landfill.

Leaves act as natural mulch which is less expensive than purchasing mulches online or at the store. According to the NC Cooperative Extension, the best leaves for a mulch or compost piles are maple, which break down easily. Oak and sycamore leaves take a

while to break down. Since these leaves take longer to break down, it is suggested that they be put in a heavy duty trash bag, set out of site, and in a year or two they will be broken down into a great mulch. Unfortunately, mulching techniques don't apply to pine needles because of their size, shape and composition. They are resistant to microbial break down, and even if they are chopped up into smaller pieces, they remain physically intact for months. The durability of pine straw has its benefits though and can be used as a landscape bedding mulch, so consider using pine needles around your shrubs.

Before breaking out the leaf blower, rake, or vacuum, consider leaving your leaves for wildlife to seek shelter and overwinter in. Instead of buying mulch, consider using what nature has already provided by mulching the leaves back into the turf. It can be cost effective, time saving and environmentally friendly as it keeps the leaves out of the landfill and reduces garbage bag usage.



A mulching mower is an effective tool to chop leaves directly back into the turf canopy without negatively impacting the turf. (Photo: Leave Them Alone: Lawn Leaf Management)



One pass of a mulching mower over slightly moist leaves (right) greatly reduces leaf coverage as compared to the unmowed area (left). (Photo: Leave Them Alone: Lawn Leaf Management)



The red-banded hairstreak is one of many butterflies that depend upon leaf litter as part of their life cycle (Photo: John Flannery/Flickr)



(Photo: Chesapeake Wildlife Heritage Facebook page)



## Servicing Your Mower in the Winter

As we start to transition from fall into winter and the yard work lessens (or so we thought), think about giving your lawn mower a little extra TLC now and make sure it's in tip top shape to improve your turf quality for next year. Servicing your mower now will help you get your lawn off to the right start next for next season.

According to the podcast titled "*Servicing Mowers Now Before Springing Them Into Action Next Season*", a top operating mower will likely reduce the fertilizer, chemical and watering inputs of your lawn next year as well as the number one disease of lawns, which is dull mower disease. Dull mower disease may cause the turf to have a brown cast or look ragged after mowing and can make turf more susceptible to disease, says UMD Extension. Detailed below are the steps you can take in winterizing your mower so it will operate at its best come next year's mowing season.

- 1) **Follow your operating manual directions-** Most mowers suggest you expend all the fuel from the tank before storing away for the winter. This can prevent problems with water accumulation or fuel line clogging and lets you start off the next year with a fresh tank of fuel.
- 2) **Change Your Spark Plug-**Before you start to service your mower, you should disconnect the spark plug. For what a new plug costs, it is probably money well spent to install a new one.
- 3) **Sharpen and Balance the Blade-**It's very important to make sure the blade is sharpened and balanced before the mowing season arrives. Would you want a haircut with a pair of dull scissors or a dull razor?! A grinding wheel would work, but if you don't have one you can take it in to a service technician that can sharpen and balance your blade. While you are there, why not purchase a new blade for next season as back up.
- 4) **While the blade is off, give the underside of the mower deck a thorough scraping-**This will extend the life of the deck and prevent you from having a lot of clean up from the chunks of decomposing grass clippings that fall from the deck onto the garage floor or shed floor.
- 5) **Change the oil, other fluids, filters and inspect belts for wear-** Your operating manual should list the specifications for fluids, filters, etc for replacement. Similar to a car, most fluids and filters require regular changing to optimize performance and extend the life of the engine. Inspect the belts on your riding mower for any fraying or to see if they are out of adjustment. Dispose of any used parts safely and properly.

The last thing you probably want to think of as the year winds down and the cold weather sets in is to service your lawn mower. Spending a few hours of maintenance on your mower now and into the winter will result in the maximum performance of your mower next season.



## Keeping Your Lawn Healthy This Winter

Maintaining our cool season, tall fescue and bluegrass dominated lawns should be completed during the fall months, September through November. Once we get hit with freezing temps, ice and possibly snow, most homeowners probably don't give the lawn a second thought. But is the work really over once winter hits? Not exactly. With the winter season being four months long, there are many things homeowners can do to minimize the risk of winter turf damage.

While cool season grasses are well adapted to winter, they can be injured in cold weather. One of the most important lines of defense is maintaining healthy turf through cultural practices. Appropriate and timely fertilization in the fall can ensure that individual grass plants receive the proper nutrition. Proper fertilization will also help develop a stronger root system to help plants recover more quickly if they get injured.

Leaving the turf too high going into winter can lead to diseases over the winter and into early spring. For the final cut of the season, cool season turf can be cut on the low side. For example, tall fescue's ideal cutting height is 3.5-4.0 inches, so it should be cut closer to 3.5 inches. Cutting it shorter will help prevent the grass blades from falling on top of each other under the weight of heavy ice or snow. When turf blades are wet and matted on top of each other, this can lead to a fungal disease known as snow mold.



Snow mold (Photo: Rich Pope)



Gray snow mold patches on home lawn 24 hours after snow had melted (Photo: David D. Minner)

Snow mold typically effects tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass. It leaves tan to grey circular spots in the lawn, which can be a foot inches in diameter to over a foot. Snow mold is further increased by heavy Nitrogen applications in late November. Damage from snow mold can be lightly raked in the spring. In Northern Virginia, the turf typically outgrows the problem without the need to reseed.



Turf that has suffered from snow mold over the winter and early spring can also be susceptible to the fungal disease called red thread if not adequately fertilized the previous fall. Fine fescues, Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass are the hosts of red thread. Red thread appears as circular or irregular patches, red to tan in color and 1.5-20 inches in diameter. If you get up close, there are pink gelatinous fungal strands that look and feel slimy. Red thread is not very common in Northern Virginia and turf will recover and grow out of red thread.



Red thread-like structures, called sclerotia, protrude from leaf blades infected by the red thread fungus (Photo: Paul Koch)



Bleached grass blades with fuzzy, pink to red masses of spider web-like strands are typical of red thread (Photo: R. Latin, Perdue Univ.)

Once cold weather arrives it is important to be on the lookout for frost and ice on the turf. Heavy foot, equipment and vehicle traffic can easily damage plant cells leading to the death of grass blades. Avoid travelling over grass until frost and ice has melted.



Traffic damage on frosted turf (Photo: Zac Reicher, Perdue University)

Unlike frost and ice, snow provides insulation and will cushion the impact of traffic. Snow can form an insulating layer over the turf to protect it from extreme cold.

A common wintertime practice is the use of deicing salt on the roads, sidewalks, and streets. Sodium chloride is the most used deicing agent. Salt is corrosive and can not only damage concrete but is toxic to plants in high concentrations. Salt that is applied to a sidewalk or driveway can build up over time and wash off into the surrounding soil.



Deicing salts and landscapes don't mix

The Extension office at University of Wisconsin-Madison notes that salt destroys soil structure, raises soil pH, causes soil compaction which reduces water infiltration and soil aeration, damages microbial life and affects the availability of nutrients to plants. Plants can experience symptoms such as poor growth, browning leaf tips, plant dieback or even plant death.

Lawn areas, especially along driveway edges, are susceptible to die off and can become bare and weedy. Try to use as little deicing material as necessary for safety purposes. Use it only where needed in high traffic areas and try to apply it before the ice bonds to the pavement

Fortunately, with just a couple of thorough soakings with the hose or a few spring rains will wash the salts out of the soil. Repairing the turf can be done once the soil is workable.

## **VCE Schedule of Wednesday Online Zoom Classes (11:00 AM-Noon)**

### **November 11- No Class**

**November 18-Floral Design**-Join Virginia Cooperative Extension and Doug Borroughs from the Manassas Flower Gallery for flower arranging tips and tricks to beautify your home for the upcoming holiday.

Please use the following link to register:

[https://vce.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_3OCVHWDvICPw0YZ](https://vce.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3OCVHWDvICPw0YZ)

### **November 25-No Class**

**December 9- Holiday Plants**- Join Virginia Cooperative Extension and Master Gardener Volunteer Janice Rice to learn about the care and management of plants typically seen around the holidays, including potted rosemary, Christmas cactus, amaryllis, live evergreens and poinsettia.

Please use the following link to register:

[https://vce.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_82jivxg6nqeB82x](https://vce.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_82jivxg6nqeB82x)

**January 13-House Plants**- Join Virginia Cooperative Extension and Master Gardener Volunteer Janice Rice for an overview of common house plants and their care.

Please use the following link to register:

[https://vce.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_9Bjw9t8WJhYrDCt](https://vce.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9Bjw9t8WJhYrDCt)

\*Registration links will close at 1:00 PM on the Tuesday before the class. A zoom link will be emailed to those registered prior to the class. For questions or further information please contact the Help Desk at [mastergardener@pwcgov.org](mailto:mastergardener@pwcgov.org)

If you missed any of the previous Wednesday online zoom classes, they can be found on the VCE-Prince William YouTube page using this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCieUH29UpfDHJiaEfon5qCQ/videos>

Virginia Cooperative Extension Horticulture classes are free (unless noted) and are open to the public. Pre-registration is required for classes. Note that class cancelations are determined by the weather and the number of registrations. For more information or to register, please contact the Extension Horticulture Help Desk at [mastergardener@pwcgov.org](mailto:mastergardener@pwcgov.org)