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TURFGRASS

Dormant Seeding of Turfgrass



The best time to seed cool-season grasses such as tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass is September because the turf has more time to mature before spring crabgrass germination and the heat stress of summer. However, dormant seeding of turfgrass is sometimes used to help fill in bare spots of lawns that weren't overseeded in the fall. Dormant overseeding is done during the winter (December – February) when it is much too cold for germination. As with any seeding program, good seed-soil contact is vital. Several methods can be used.

One method is to seed when there has been a light snowfall of up to an inch. This is shallow enough that bare spots can still be seen. Spread seed by hand on areas that need thickening up. As the snow melts, it brings the seed into good contact with the soil where it will germinate in the spring.

Another method is dependent on the surface of the soil being moist followed by some freezing weather. As moist soil freezes and thaws, small pockets are formed on the wet, bare soil that are perfect for catching and holding seed. As the soil dries, the pockets collapse and cover the seed.

A third method involves core aerating, verticutting or hand raking and broadcasting seed immediately after. Of course, the soil must be dry enough and unfrozen for this to be practical.

With any of the above methods, seed germinates in the spring as early as possible. However, there will be some limitations on what herbicides can be used for weed control. Tupersan (siduron) can be used as a crabgrass preventer on new seedings even before they have come up. Also dithiopyr, found in Hi-Yield Turf and Ornamental Weed and Grass Stopper, can be used on tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass two weeks after germination. Dithiopyr is longer lasting and more effective than siduron. Other preemergence herbicides require that the turf be well established before application. (WU)

Lawns and Tree Leaves



Quite a few people have asked recently if they should mulch leaves with their mulching mower and leave (pun intended) them in the turf area. Several studies at Michigan State, Cornell, Rutgers and Purdue have concluded that mulching tree leaves into turf will not harm healthy turf and can be an easy, cost-effective way to dispose of them. For details read the Purdue research report titled, "Leaf Mulching Effects on Turf Performance" at <http://www.agry.purdue.edu/turf/report/1999/page24.htm> or an article in Grounds Maintenance

Magazine, titled, "Mulching Tree Leaves: An Alternative to Disposal" at http://www.grounds-mag.com/mag/grounds_maintenance_mulching_tree_leaves/

Ok, so now that I've told you it's OK to mulch your leaves with your mulching mower, let me make a couple of statements regarding mower safety and performance.

- * Remember, a good sharp blade is better at cutting grass than a dull one. The same is true for mulching leaves. Use a sharp blade to ensure that the mower will correctly mulch the leaves without causing undue strain on the mechanical parts of your mower.
- * I said it is safe to mulch leaves — NOT sticks or branches or even garbage. Make sure you walk around the area, kicking up leaves and looking for fallen sticks, cans, bottles or other buried litter. Hitting these types of objects can damage your mower. They may injure or kill you or others.
- * You should already be wearing eye and ear protection when you mow, but you may want to wear a dust mask when you mulch. Mulching dry leaves tends to be a dusty, dirty job.
- * Dry leaves are easiest to mulch. Some prefer a little moisture in the leaves to keep dust down, but do not mulch wet or soggy leaves.
- * Remember to inspect and clean the mower's air filter.
- * Follow the same principle as the 1/3 rule for mowing grass. Don't try to mulch too many leaves at once. There are limits to how much leaf debris your mower can handle, and mulching too much at one time can damage your mower, injure you, and/or create mulch with less-than-optimal sized particles. As with mowing, you have to mulch more than once — now and again after all the leaves have fallen. (RSJ)

ORNAMENTALS

Pruning Shrubs



Recently, we have received a number of calls from gardeners wanting to cut back shrubs. Though light pruning and/or removal of dead wood is fine this time of year, severe pruning should be left until spring. Keep in mind that even light pruning of spring-blooming shrubs such as lilac and forsythia will reduce flowers for next year. We normally recommend that spring-bloomers be pruned after flowering.

Shrubs differ in how severely they can be cut back. Junipers do not break bud from within the plant and therefore should be trimmed lightly if you wish to keep the full shape. Overgrown junipers should be removed. On the other hand, there are certain shrubs that can be pruned back severely during the spring. Rejuvenation is the most severe type of pruning and may be used on multi-stem shrubs that have become too large with too many old branches to justify saving the younger canes. All stems are cut back to 3- to 5-inch stubs. This works well for spirea, forsythia, pyracantha, ninebark, Russian almond, little leaf mock orange, shrub roses and flowering quince. Just remember that spring is the correct time to do this, not now. (WU)

FLOWERS

Winterizing Roses



Though most shrub roses are hardy in Kansas, other types of roses can be more tender. For example, the hybrid teas have certain species in their ancestry that originated in the warm climate of southern China. These roses need protection to reliably survive Kansas winters.

Mound soil or compost about 8 to 10 inches high around each plant. If using soil, bring it in from another part of the garden. Do not pull it from between plants because this can damage the rose roots or make them more susceptible to cold. This normally is finished by Thanksgiving.

After the ground has frozen, add a 4-inch mulch of straw, leaves or hay for further protection. More soil may be spread on top of the mulch to keep it in place. Do not add the mulch before the

ground freezes or mice may invade and feed on the roses over the winter. The purpose of these coverings is not only to moderate the cold, but also to prevent warm days during the winter or early spring from stimulating growth that is tender to returning cold weather.

Excessively tall canes should be pruned to a height of 36 inches and tied together to prevent them from being whipped by strong winter winds. Wind can damage the crown of the plant or loosen the surrounding soil. Next spring, remove coverings before new growth starts. Wait until after the ground thaws, or the tops may begin growing before the roots can provide water. (WU)

MISCELLANEOUS

Soil Tests and Plant Growth



Though soil tests are useful for identifying nutrient deficiencies as well as soil pH, they do not tell the whole story. We often receive soils from gardeners who are having a difficult time growing crops even though the soil test shows that nothing is deficient. Here are some factors that can affect plant growth that are not due to nutrient deficiencies or pH.

Not enough sun: Plants need a certain minimum amount of sun before they will grow well. As a general rule, flowering (and fruiting) plants need at least 6 to 8 hours of full sun per day. There are, of course, exceptions such as impatiens that bloom well in shade. Move sun-loving plants out from the shade or use plants that are better adapted to shady conditions.

Poor soil physical characteristics: Roots need oxygen as much as they need water. A tight clay soil can restrict soil oxygen levels as well as make root penetration of the soil difficult. Increasing the organic matter content of clay soils can help break them up. Add a 2-inch layer of organic matter and till it in.

Walnut trees: Walnuts give off a natural herbicide that interferes with the growth of some plants such as tomatoes. Vegetable gardens should be at least 50 feet away from walnut trees if possible. For a listing of plants that are susceptible to walnut, go to: http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/facts/info_walnut_toxicity.htm

Tree roots: Trees not only compete with other plants for sun but also for water and nutrients. Extra water and nutrients may be needed.

Shallow soils: When new homes are built, the topsoil is often stripped off before the soils are brought to grade. Though the topsoil should be replaced, it sometimes is not or is not replaced to the same depth as it was originally. You are left with subsoil that usually does not allow plants to grow well due to a lack of soil structure. Adding topsoil to a depth of 8 to 12 inches would be best

but this often is not practical. In such cases, try to rebuild structure by adding organic matter and working it into the soil.

Added soil: Sometimes soil is added to smooth out an area or topsoil is added but only a shallow layer is used. Roots will not go from one soil type to another. Always blend in added soil to existing soil so there is a gradient from one to the other. For example, let's say you want to add 6 inches of topsoil. Add 3 inches and till in to a depth of 6 inches and then add the remaining 3 inches of topsoil. You now have a gradient that goes from the topsoil to the existing soil.

Improper watering: Roots develop where conditions are best for growth. Shallow, frequent watering leads to roots developing primarily near the surface of the soil where the soil is moist. Such shallow root systems are easily damaged by heat and any interruption in the watering schedule. It is better to water less frequently and to a greater depth to encourage a deeper root system that is less sensitive to heat and water stress.

Watering during the evening can also be detrimental to plants if the irrigation wets the foliage. Many diseases are encouraged by free water on the leaves. Watering late in the day often will keep the foliage wet until dew forms. Dew will keep the foliage wet until it evaporates the next morning. It is better to water early in the morning so leaves do not stay wet as long. If you must water late in the day, use drip irrigation if practical (such as in a vegetable garden).

Gas Leaks: Make sure that a natural gas line does not run under the affected area. Leaks from that line can kill existing vegetation. If this is the cause, everything in that area will be killed. (WU)

Draining Hoses and Irrigation Lines



Hoses and shallow irrigation lines may be damaged over the winter if water is not drained. Lawn irrigation systems usually have shallow lines but are often built to be self-draining. If there is a main shut-off valve for the system, close it and then run through the zones to make sure any pressure has a chance to bleed off. Also check the irrigation as-built map to make sure there aren't any drains that must be opened manually. Drain hoses by stretching them out and then coiling them for storage. Water will drain as you pull the hose

toward you for coiling. Store them in a protected place as UV light can make them brittle over time. (WU)

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