

Post Rock Answers

By Cassie Thiessen September 16, 2022

Post Rock Extension District Horticulture Agent

Fall Lawn Care

If you wish your grass was a little greener, now is the time to act! September is the best time of the year to fertilize cool season lawns such as tall fescue and bluegrass. Fall is also a great time to do some lawn maintenance such as over-seeding and controlling weeds.

If you have a cool season lawn such as Tall Fescue or Kentucky Bluegrass now is the perfect time to over-seed. Lawns that have become thin over the summer can be thickened up by over-seeding during September. Start by mowing the grass shorter than normal, about one to one and a half inches, and removing the clippings. This will make it easier to achieve good seed-soil contact and increase the amount of light that will reach the young seedlings. Good seed-soil contact is vital if the over-seeding is to be successful. Excess thatch can prevent seed from reaching the soil and germinating. Normally we want 1/4 inch of thatch or less when over-seeding. If the thatch layer is 3/4 inch or more, it is usually easiest to use a sod cutter to remove it and start over with a new lawn. A power rake can be used to reduce a thatch layer that is less than 3/4 inch but more than a quarter inch.

If your lawn is compacted or you have hard, clay soil you will need to aerate before you seed. This can be done in various ways. For small spots, a hand rake can be used to roughen up the soil before the seed is applied. A verticut machine has solid vertical blades that can be set to cut furrows in the soil. It is best to go two different directions with the machine. A slit seeder is a verticut machine with a seed hopper added so the soil prep and seeding operation are combined. Another option is to use a core aerator. The core aerator will punch holes in the soil and deposit the soil cores on the surface of the ground. Each hole produces an excellent environment for seed germination and growth. Make three to four passes with the core aerator to ensure enough holes for the seed. Using a core aerator has the additional benefit of reducing the amount of watering needed to get the seed germinated and growing. Aeration also increases the water infiltration rate, decreases compaction, and increases the amount of oxygen in the soil.

If you are just wanting to give your lawn a little boost without over-seeding, September is the best time to apply fertilizer. These grasses are entering their fall growth cycle as days shorten

and temperatures moderate. Cool-season grasses naturally thicken up in the fall by tillering. This means they are growing and forming new shoots at the base of existing plants.

Nitrogen (N), the first number listed on a bag of fertilizer, helps thicken the stand and encourage development of a healthy root system. Apply 1 to 1.5 pounds of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. The settings recommended on lawn fertilizer bags usually result in about 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. A strong root system is the foundation of a nice lawn. Cooler temperatures, fall rains and the addition of the nutrients help the lawn to recover from stressful summer conditions. The food is converted into new roots, crowns, and shoots. This application helps to thicken up thin areas. A dense healthy lawn is our best defense against weeds and that prevention starts with this application of fertilizer.

Choosing the right type of fertilizer is important. Nitrogen in fertilizer is the most important nutrient, as it is needed in the greatest quantities by the turf. We recommend a quick-release source of nitrogen at this time. Most fertilizers sold in garden centers and department stores contain either quick-release nitrogen or a mixture of quick- and slow-release. Usually only lawn fertilizers recommended for summer use contain slow-release nitrogen. Any of the others should be quick-release. Nitrogen is essential for healthy growth, color, and density. Vigorously growing lawns use more than is available in the soil, so it must be replenished on a regular basis.

The second most important fertilization of cool-season grasses also occurs during the fall. A November fertilizer application will help the grass green up earlier next spring and provide the nutrients needed until summer. It also should be quick-release applied at the rate of one-pound actual nitrogen per one thousand square feet.

Be the envy of all your neighbors this year with a thick, lush lawn. Incorporating a few of these steps into your lawn care routine is sure to green up your yard. If you have any questions, please call your local Extension office.

Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Cassie may be contacted at cchiessen@ksu.edu or by calling Beloit (785-738-3597).