Homes & Gardens

Town Tribune Weekly Guide To Fall Living

Taller or Shorter Grass in Fall?



Just like people prefer different haircuts throughout the year depending on the weather, so do lawns. The height you mow your grass in July is going to be different than in November.

But what about fall? This is actually a critical time to keep mowing because you're setting your lawn up to stay healthy and disease-free throughout the dormant season.

The exact length, however, will shift slightly over the course of the season. Here's what the pros had to say about how tall to mow your grass in the fall.

How Tall Should You Mow Your Grass in Fall?

"First, I like to note that regular mowing remains important throughout the fall," says Brian Feldman is the senior director of technical operations at TruGreen.

He recommends gradually working your way down throughout the season until you hit an average winter height of around two inches, depending on the species.

"The final cut [should be] about one inch below your lawn's regular mowing height," says Feldman. "This mowing strategy works to help remove that excessive growth that can mat down over winter and contribute to snow mold and other issues."

Cool-Season Grass:

For cool-season grasses, which grow the most during milder weather in spring and fall, you can leave them a bit longer. This applies to cool-season grasses throughout the year, not just during the fall season.

"For cool-season grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, tall fescue and fine fescue, you should gradually reduce mowing height for your lawn in late fall and aim for a final height of around two inches," says Feldman.

Warm-Season Grass:

Warm-season grasses hit their growing period from spring through early fall during, of course, the warmer months. These can be cut shorter during the fall, even as low as just an inch and a half.

Warm-season grasses include common species like Bermudagrass and St. Augustine grass.

Why You Should Not Cut Your Grass Short Before Winter:

While you should cut your grass shorter before winter, that does not necessarily mean cut it short. Theresa Smith, senior vice president of NaturaLawn, explains that cutting it short in one fell swoop can actually put your lawn at risk for disease.

She recommends never removing more than one-third the length of the blade at a time, and, instead, cutting gradually.

"Lower the mowing height over a few mowings to avoid making one dramatic cut at the end of the season," Smith says.

Cutting the grass too short can also weaken its root system, which can make it more vulnerable during the coldest months of the year. When spring arrives, the lawn will have a tougher time bouncing back.

Avoid cutting the grass when the lawn in wet. The cut will be uneven, and clumps of soggy grass with smother healthy grass.

4 Other Fall Lawn Care Tasks

Fall is not the time to take off time from caring for your lawn. The lawn care you do now lays the foundation for a lush, healthy lawn in the spring, so make sure you're taking good care of it.

Fertilize:

Smith explains that fall is the ideal time for grass to recover after the sweltering summer days, and that's why it's also the ideal time to apply fertilizer that will give grass an extra boost before it goes dormant.

"Since daylight hours are shorter, the grass plant produces less top growth and directs the nutrients in the fertilizer toward root development," Smith says. "Additionally, fall fertilization helps the grass store carbohydrates, which it then uses as food over the winter months."

Clear Weeds and Leaves:

Fall is the time to clean up your lawn. Clear it of leaves, debris, and dead growth by dethatching and raking it. Then, get any weeds in control before they have time to take hold in the winter during the slow growing season.

"Control weeds before they spread or go to seed," Feldman says. "Late fall is also a good time for those with warm-season lawns to apply pre-emergent weed control for winter annual weeds."

Aerate and Overseed:

Fall is known as prime time to apply grass seed to a lawn, also known as overseeding. Aerate your lawn to improve the soil structure, reduce soil compaction, and give the seed a head start on germination.

"Just be sure to do so before soil temperatures drop below 50°F," Feldman adds.

Continue Watering:

Lastly, don't take a break from watering just because you no longer see the lawn drooping anymore. As long as the grass is growing, it does need an occasional drink of water.

"Water during extended dry periods until the ground freezes. This practice is particularly helpful to reduce the risk of winter desiccation, which is when the grass dries out over the winter," Feldman says.

Lawn Pros Warn This Everyday Habit Can Damage Your Grass in Fall and Winter:

Here's How to Avoid It



In cold areas, turf grasses go dormant in winter and generally need minimal care. During this time, grass also becomes more brittle and vulnerable to damage, which can result in brown spots and patchy lawns if you don't take proper precautions to protect your turf.

In this guide, pros share why you should avoid walking on your lawn in fall and winter when you can, and offer expert tips that will protect your grass no matter what the winter brings.

The Common Habit Ruining Your Lawn in Fall and Winter:

When frost hits and the ground freezes, grasses stop growing and lose their green color or turn entirely brown once dormant. Lawns can experience more drainage issues, muddiness, and pooling water at this time, too.

But while lawns can handle some winter stress, frosts and freezing weather do leave grass plants more vulnerable to damage – especially if you drive or park on your grass in winter or expose it to heavy foot traffic.

"Foot traffic compacts wet soil, suffocates roots, and grinds fallen leaves into lawns, which can trap disease and block out necessary sunlight," explains Manjot Sidhu of the University of Maine.

However, it's not just drainage issues and soil compaction that you need to worry about.

"Freezing temperatures also turn the water inside grass blades into sharp ice crystals, which can damage the plant's cell walls if you step on your lawn when it's dormant," Sidhu adds.

Some light foot traffic may not cause much damage; however, lots of walking or driving and parking on your lawn may produce bigger problems.

"This can result in winterkill, which shows up as brown spots in lawns come spring—often in the shape of footprints or tire marks," says Rachel Anderson of the University of Nebraska.

Should You Ever Walk on Your Lawn?

Heavy foot traffic can leave lawns looking bedraggled, but that doesn't mean you can't walk to your mailbox or stroll around your garden as you please. The important thing is to reduce heavy wear and tear on your lawn as much as you can.

"To avoid damage, keep driveways and paths cleared of snow and ice to encourage people and pets to stay off frozen grass," Sidhu says. "Placing temporary stepping stones, rubber mats, or mulch over high-traffic areas can help too."

Whenever possible, avoid parking cars or heavy equipment on your turf in cold weather, and avoid walking on your lawn when the soil is soggy as well.

"During freeze-thaw cycles, soils can become muddy and saturated with water," explains Geoff Schortgen of Purdue University. "This makes them more susceptible to compaction, which can inhibit root growth and cause more damage."

5 Ways to Protect Your Lawn from Winter Damage:

Reducing foot traffic in lawns in winter is one way to minimize turf grass damage. But if you want your lawn to look as lush as possible come spring, here are a few more tips to try.

• Mulch autumn leaves. "Wait for the leaves to dry out. Then, chop them finely with a mulching attachment on your mower," Anderson says. "Break up any clumps with a leaf rake and spread the leaves over your lawn in an even, light layer that will decompose quickly into the soil."

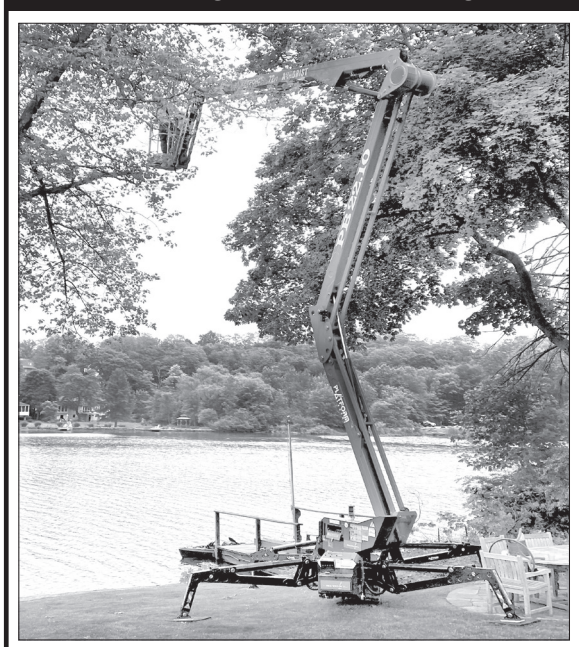
• Limit road salt. Road salt can dehydrate grass and other plants and lead to discoloration and reduced soil fertility if you apply it too liberally. To avoid this, carefully spread road salt only to the areas where it's needed and water your lawn and plants deeply in spring to wash excess salt away.

• Fertilize early. It's typically best to stop fertilizing most lawns a few weeks before frost is expected and to take care not to apply too much nitrogen in particular. Overfertilizing lawns late in the year can make grass more vulnerable to frost damage and fungal issues.

• Mow and shovel with care. Raise your mower deck higher in fall and don't keep mowing once frost hits. When shoveling snow, do your best to keep your shovel blade confined to your driveway and other hard surfaces so you don't accidentally dislodge clumps of grass and sod.

• Watch for pests. Unlike moles, voles and some other rodents stay active in winter and can feed on grass blades and roots. Mowing your lawn in autumn and removing old plant debris before it freezes to the ground should reduce hiding spots and make these garden visitors less likely to stick around.

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