

Give Your Grass a Winter Break

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Are you still pushing a lawn mower at this time of year? I look at my yard and grimace as I see spots in the lawn, weeds coming up, and bags of fertilizer and lime that I didn't have a chance to put out. With the cool weather, it feels like a good time for me to give my lawn some TLC but not really a good time for my grass. This article will let you know what you should and shouldn't do to your lawn as we approach the colder months.

If you are ready to whip your fertilizer spreader out, don't. The last recommended time to fertilize for North Florida was late September and October for Central Florida. During that last application, it's better to have a fertilizer with higher amounts of potassium (the last number of the 3-digit code, e.g. 15-0-15). Potassium strengthens the grass, helping it withstand drought, cold, and disease. If you didn't do this, you know for next time.

By applying too late in the year, your grass will continue to grow, making it more cold-sensitive and increases the risk of killing it during a hard freeze. In general, the roots and leaves go dormant in the winter and any additional fertilizer will be lost as pollution. Due to this, Alachua County has adopted a new fertilizer code (effective May 24, 2016) enacting a fertilizer ban from December to February.

It is recommended to start fertilizing again in mid-April for North Florida and late March for Central Florida. This gives the turf a chance to wake up. Pre-emergent herbicides are often applied in February to keep weeds at bay before emerging. I don't recommend weed and feed products which often contain pre-emergent herbicides because you will either be applying the herbicide or the fertilizer at the wrong time.

As your grass slows down in growth, you should be getting your mower ready for its winter resting place. If you mow one last time, make sure you mow your grass as the highest mowing height for your grass to help it withstand the cold.

If you haven't already done so, change your irrigation system to turn on only once a week (Saturday for odd number houses, Sunday for even number, and Tuesday for non-residential). When daylight savings time changed, so did the irrigation restrictions.

In actuality, turfgrass doesn't even need the once a week watering during the winter. I turn off my system completely during the fall and winter and only turn it on if the

leaves are folded during warmer fall temperatures. Just like a bear doesn't need to eat and drink while it is hibernating, the lawn doesn't need to either when it is dormant.

If you can't stand the look of a brown lawn or have some spots that the weeds are trying to fill, try overseeding the lawn with ryegrass. It is a cool-season annual so it will green up the area and die back in the spring when you want to start managing your turfgrass. The only drawback is that this grass will need some water, fertilizing, and mowing to keep it looking good during the winter.

Another option is to spray your brown grass green with turf colorants. They are special paints or dyes and have been used for years to green up golf courses in the winter.

If your lawn freezes over the winter, resist the urge to do anything right then. In the spring, take a plug of grass and plant it in a pot in a warm area and check to see if it is still living. If so, great! If not, plant some grass plugs or sod pieces.

Although there are other things you can do in your garden during the winter, give yourself and your grass a break. For more information on managing turfgrass in the winter, check out <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu>.

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