Winterize your lawn with potash, not nitrogen

Once again, we are approaching the fall season. What you do now and throughout the rest of the year will, to a great extent, determine how your lawn looks next spring.

It’s sometimes hard to convince people that dead spots in their lawns in the spring were probably caused by something they did, or didn’t do, the previous autumn. In order to have the best lawn possible, be sure to maintain your lawn by applying the correct fertilizer, managing for insects and watering appropriately.

In the fall, the emphasis in fertilizing changes from growth to strength. In September, apply a fertilizer with less nitrogen to slow growth and more potassium, also known as potash, to build stress tolerance.

A general, complete lawn fertilizer has three major nutrients: nitrogen (N), phosphate (P₂O₅) and potash (K₂O). These nutrients are the three numbers listed on every fertilizer bag.

If you apply a relatively high nitrogen fertilizer in the fall, it will produce soft, lush growth. This tender growth is more susceptible to diseases like large patch, insect infestations and damage by cold weather.

Beware of northern-blend “winterizers” that have high nitrogen and low potash. Apply any fall fertilization no later than September 15th in Northwest Florida. Remember, this will be the last nitrogen fertilizer application of the year.

Now is also a great time to scout your lawn for pest insects. Sod webworms have been very active along the Gulf Coast.

Inspect the lawn once each week during late summer and early fall. Look for off-color areas and determine if these patches have a ragged or chewed appearance. Part the grass in several of the suspect areas and closely examine the soil surface. The larvae are small greenish caterpillars. They may be very small when...
young, with a full sized caterpillar being less than one inch in length.

Sometimes the caterpillars are difficult to find, even when present in damaging numbers. This is because they curl up in a “C” shape and hide in the thatch, as well as on the soil surface. Small green pellets of their excrement are also present near the soil surface and this material is often easier to find than the caterpillar.

If all else fails and you still suspect sod webworms, use a soap flush in order to more thoroughly check these areas. Mix 2 tablespoons of liquid dishwashing soap in 2-gallons of water and drench four square feet of area with this solution. If any caterpillars are present, they will emerge to the grass surface and can be easily detected.

Start treatment as soon as these pests are noted. Some control products include B.t. (Dipel or Thuricide), carbaryl (Sevin), bifenthrin (Talstar) or lambda-cyhalothrin (Spectracide Triazicide). Always follow label directions exactly.

In Northwest Florida, fall can be one of our drier seasons. As the weather cools, the afternoon showers usually stop. It is still important to continue to water your lawn as needed, but the lawn will need water less frequently as its growth starts to slow down.

Continue to apply ½ to 3/4 of an inch of water when the turfgrass shows water deficit symptoms. Do not irrigate again until water symptoms are again noticeable. For more information on watering on an “as needed” basis, contact your local Extension Office or review the online publication, “Let Your Lawn Tell You When to Water” at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/EP/EP05400.pdf.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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