



Fall Lawn Care: Must or Lust?

Fall yard care means the dreaded tasks of leaf removal, leaf disposal and lawn care. We offer some ideas to make these chores easier—and fun!

By Emily Goodman

About the Author

Emily Goodman is a freelance writer based in New York. Winter's just around the corner, and you're no doubt looking forward to putting away your lawn mower and relaxing at the close of the growing season. But don't get too comfortable yet! Fall is a surprisingly busy time of year when extra effort can really pay off in a thicker, healthier lawn next spring.

First off, you have to deal with all those crinkly red and brown objects flying through the air, falling all over your lawn and flowerbeds, and filling your rain gutters.

We're talking about leaves, of course. They're a natural product of trees and you've heard they're good for the soil. So they must be good for your lawn and you can just leave them where they fall, right?

Forests vs. Prairies

Why you should get leaves off the lawn

While most people think it's perfectly natural to plant trees in a grass lawn, these plants actually come from two different ecosystems. Trees come from forests, where their fallen leaves decay slowly over years to form deep, humus-rich soils underfoot. There is no grass in forests, only wildflowers and groundcover plants specially adapted to surviving in leaf litter.

Grasses, on the other hand, are sun-loving plants from the prairies. They like being the tallest plants around, with nothing overhead to shade them.

So mixing grasses and trees, no matter how "natural" it may look, is actually highly unnatural--and that causes problems. Most grasses don't like growing under trees, where it's shaded. And in autumn, the shade gets even closer. As falling leaves pile up on your lawn, they cover and may even smother the grass plants underneath.

Many species of grass are still growing in early fall and are eager to take advantage of the extra sunlight available now that the trees are bare.

The solution? Simple. Remove the fallen leaves from the lawn. Wrong! Leaves and lawn don't mix. Read on to learn what you really have to do to get your lawn ready for winter and the best tools with which to do it.

Leaf Removal

Since it's important for lawn health to remove fallen leaves, what's the best way to do this basic fall task? Fortunately, there are all kinds of tools and machines available to help you: Vacuums, blowers, sweepers and simple rakes all help pick leaves up or gather them into one place; shredders rip them to pieces; composters accelerate turning shredded leaves into compost; and long-handled tongs help get them out of your gutters.

Must: Rake

Wondrous as all the machines are, they haven't completely replaced the lowly rake. Rakes are cheap, they're quiet, they don't pollute or contribute to global warming, and some people actually enjoy the outdoor exercise. Besides, even if you buy the fanciest leaf blower or vacuum on the market, you'll still need a rake to pick up the odds and ends mechanical equipment leaves behind, and to help with dethatching (see below).

The classic fan-shaped lawn rake is a basic piece of garden equipment. Today there are rakes made of metal, rakes made of bamboo, rakes with springy tines, self-declogging rakes and ergonomic models with bent handles that help you rake without bending over. There are also narrow ones for raking in garden beds and wide models to cover lots of lawn with each sweep.



Lust: Lawn Sweeper

To gather leaves with minimal effort, try a lawn sweeper. These workhorses hook up behind your tractor mower and as you drive around, its rotating, replaceable brushes sweep across the surface of your lawn like a hairbrush, pushing leaves, grass clippings and small debris into a hopper bag. You can even dump the bag into your compost pile via a rope cord without leaving your seat on the mower. The bag holds 12 cubic feet, or 10 bushels, of yard debris.

Once you've raked or swept your leaves into heaps, what's next? Shredding them into smaller pieces can reduce the size of those piles dramatically. This makes them much easier to handle, whether you plan to lug them to the garbage dump or, a much better idea, turn them into mulch or compost. You can run your mulching lawnmower over the leaves again and again to shred them or you can use a leaf shredder.

Must: Leaf Shredder

There are many models of mini-leaf shredders on the market. Many attach to trash cans. Perhaps a better idea, when you replace your lawn mower, is to get a so-called mulching mower (85 percent of new mowers are mulchers), which can shred grass clippings so fine they fall between the remaining blades of grass onto the soil surface, instead of resting on top of the lawn. Look for a model with at least 5- or 6-HP and a four-stroke engine.

Lust: Leaf Vacuum

If your property is simply too large for an over-the-trash-can model, a good alternative is one that can be pulled behind your mower. Agri-Fab's Chip-N-Vac is the Cadillac of shredder-mowers and is a combination wood chipper/vacuum. It can dramatically cut down on your lawn maintenance time by vacuuming up grass clippings, leaves and other debris while you mow. It sucks up even pesky debris like pine needles through a 6-inch hose, leaving your lawn perfectly manicured, then shreds the debris, reducing leaves to one-quarter their original volume.

Mulch vs. Compost

Mulch and compost are not the same, though people often confuse these two terms.

Mulch:

Something you put over bare soil to cover it up. Bare soil is dangerous: it lets water evaporate quickly, meaning you have to water more often; it exposes plant roots to temperature changes, possibly damaging the plant; and it will soon sprout weeds, equaling more work for you.

Mulch can be almost anything: newspaper, black plastic, gravel, shredded leaves or wood chips, just to name a few options.

Bonus: An organic mulch, like wood chips, will add nutrients to the soil as it decays, gradually turning into compost and feeding your plants.

Compost:

Plant matter decayed until it's turned into rich, dark stuff that looks like soil, with its nutrients immediately available to nourish plants. It's great to spread around your plants because it improves soil texture.

A bonus feature is the wood chipper, which can demolish branches up to two inches thick. This workhorse can hold a whopping 32 cubic feet, or 26 bushels, of debris.

Composters

Shredded leaves are already well on their way to becoming compost, so you might as well continue the process and return this resource to your garden.

Must: Compost Pile

There are many composters on the market. But the simplest method of all is to leave plant debris in a pile for a year (the "cold" method); it will gradually decompose. Adding the right mix of "greens" (grass clippings, kitchen vegetable scraps) and "browns" (dead leaves), and the right amount of water and air (from turning the pile over), will help the compost "cook" chemically (the "hot" method).

Lust: Composter

Trials suggest that compost tumblers don't actually make compost faster than the pile method. But they do make it easier to mix the compost, which means you might turn it more frequently and thus help your compost cook more thoroughly. They also are neater to look at, pest-resistant (though not insect-proof) and odorless. The PBM Group's ComposTumbler and the Mantis ComposT-Twin are deluxe hand-cranked models. The crank rotates a drum to mix the decomposing matter inside. The drum is high enough off the ground that to gather finished compost, you simply push a wheelbarrow



under the drum, position the door over it, open and pour out the compost--much easier than having to shovel it out of piles, bins or lower drums. The Compost-Twin has two smaller barrels side by side so you can start one and let it "cook" while adding new compost ingredients to the other one.

Lawn Dethatchers

You've heard of thatched-roof cottages. Thatch is simply dead grass; the reason it makes a good roof is because it's waterproof. Thatch in your lawn will prevent water from penetrating the soil.

Do You Have Thatch?

How can you tell if you have a thatch problem?

Every lawn has some thatch. A thin layer (less than a half-inch thick) is actually desirable because it prevents water from evaporating too quickly from the soil. But do you have too much?

Part the grass stems and try to look at your soil. If that's impossible, because there's a whitish, straw-like layer of dead stuff between the green and the soil, then congratulations--you have thatch. Another method is to remove a core of soil from the lawn with a trowel or probe. This makes it easy to see how thick the layer of thatch is. Half an inch to an inch of thatch is considered a small problem. If it's more than an inch thick, you have a serious thatch problem.

If grass is like hair growing on a scalp (the soil), then thatch is like dandruff. It's a layer of dead matter--grass stems, roots and grass clippings--that settles on the soil surface, below the green part of your lawn. When thatch builds up, usually on lawns that have been heavily watered or fertilized, it prevents sunlight, water, oxygen and nutrients from reaching the grass roots--literally starving the plants. If the thatch layer is a half-inch thick or more, you need to dethatch.

Dethatching is best done in early spring or late fall when your grass isn't growing actively.

Must: Scrake

There are special thatch rakes, called scrakes, created just for dethatching. Scrakes have sharp, metal blades (instead of tines) attached to a horizontal bar. The knife blades cut through the thatch and help pull it to the surface.

In lieu of a scrake, rake your lawn--hard. The tines of the rake will pull thatch out. For small jobs (a half- to one-inch of thatch), a rake is actually better than a power tool because it's less damaging to the grass. Even if you use a power dethatcher, you'll still have to rake up the thatch you pull out afterwards.

Lust: Dethatcher Attachment

A dethatching attachment for your lawn tractor works like a power mower except its spring-loaded tines move vertically down to the soil surface instead of across. The combing action removes the thatch. Springs mean the tines have some "give" so they don't tear the soil. Unlike many dethatchers on the market, the Agri-Fab 48" tine dethatcher is a lightweight piece of equipment that is easy to pick up and move. Its steel tray can be weighted down to the appropriate height for your lawn.

Lawn Aerators

In the quest for a thick, healthy lawn, raking leaves and dethatching go a long way. The final step for people with compacted or drought-hardened soil is aeration.

Is Your Soil Compacted?

Your daughter's 30-member marching band practices every day in your yard. Your son always parks his loaded truck in the same spot on the lawn. Abuse like this, repeated many times, will compact soil: squeezing out the air spaces between soil particles so it loses its naturally porous texture.

When there are no more spaces for air, water and nutrients can't seep into the ground to feed grass roots, either.

How can you tell if your soil is compacted? Try the shovel test: if you can't push a shovel in half an inch, it's compacted. Another clue is if water stands on the surface of the lawn after it rains because it can't seep into the hard ground. Aerating your lawn means, basically, punching holes into the hard soil to allow water, oxygen and nutrients to penetrate deeper. This is done by pushing into the ground either solid spikes or hollow cylinders. Hollow cylinders have the added benefit of popping out "plugs" of soil through the center of the cylinder and leaving them on the lawn surface. Even though these soil remnants may look temporarily unsightly, the plug method is considered more effective because of this exchange of



materials: Soil below the surface is brought up to the top, where it's left to decay on its own and its nutrients gradually seep back into the ground, while water and fertilizer from above ground are brought down into the soil, where they'll benefit grass roots.

Leaving the plugs on the lawn surface looks raggedy for a few days, but the benefits of aeration will pay off in much healthier grass that will spread more thickly and compete better against weeds.

Aerating is usually done immediately after dethatching in the spring or fall, when the grass is not actively growing. For best results, it should be done about once every three years.

Must: Garden Fork

Simple aeration jobs can be done by hand or by foot. The hand method uses a garden fork. You poke its tines into the ground, usually about one to two inches deep, and wiggle the fork to loosen the soil. The foot method requires wearing shoes with spikes on the bottom. This job can be fun, for about two minutes. Imagine the joy of plunging your garden fork into or treading with spiked shoes on every square inch of your yard! Manual aerating is recommended only for perfectionists with very small lawns.

Lust: Plug Aerator Attachment

This is one job where the machine definitely makes more sense. Agri-Fab's 48" plug aerator removes soil plugs up to three inches deep with 32 galvanized steel points that are rotated on spools into the soil. A single lever makes it convenient to raise all the wheels at once; especially handy for things like driving across concrete (other models require you to manipulate different levers for each wheel). It's ideal for both heavily compacted and drought-damaged areas.

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