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AUTUMN LAWN CARE MEANS GREEN REWARDS NEXT YEAR

Whether planting a new lawn or taking care of one already established, fall is the perfect time to do the job to enjoy a better lawn next year, according to Lin Diacont President of the Virginia Green Industry Council. The winter resting period allows lawns to absorb nutrients and to build up strength in their root systems.

Fertilizing established lawns is extremely important during the autumn months since this is the time when grass is storing up nutrients for next year's growth. It is also a good time to dethatch the lawn to get out dead particles and allow it to grow healthy and thick. Check the lawn area thoroughly. Note weed areas or bare spots that need sprucing up, or pest areas that need control.

Early autumn is also the best time for seeding or sodding a lawn. While there are a host of different grasses which will suit various climatic and soil conditions, the basic ingredients in planning and caring for a lawn are generally alike.

If putting in a new lawn, or making improvements in one, be sure to plan the layout to fit the overall landscape plan of the property. Avoid planting in areas that will make mowing difficult in the future or which will require substantial hand clipping of grass. The lawn should blend comfortably with the general landscape and help to enhance other plantings in the area.

Lawn seed should be selected carefully, preferably from a local garden center or nursery, where someone can give advice on the particular variety that will serve the homeowner's purposes. If sod is to be planted, it should be selected from a quality grower who produces lawn varieties suitable for local conditions.

The lawn bed should be prepared thoroughly before planting. Soil should be loose enough to allow the new roots to penetrate and get good foothold. If the soil is particularly hard or compact, tilling or digging in a few inches deep and raking is generally sufficient. Mixing peat moss into the soil helps to improve its quality as well. The planting area should be checked for proper drainage. Puddles or wet areas will rot the grass. Holes and depressions should be filled with topsoil.

A lawn spreader is the ideal tool for spreading the right amount of seed. Generally, the seed package has proper instructions, or you can get advice from an expert on proper sowing of the specific variety. Most spreaders have adjustments for specific concentrations of seeding or fertilizing. Smaller areas can, of course, be sown by hand. Cover the new seed by gently raking over the area.

If the soil is especially loose, it may be advisable to roll the planted area. This helps to compact the soil somewhat and allow moisture to permeate evenly throughout the soil. Mulching the soil with a thin layer of straw or other material that allows light and air into the bed will also help retain moisture. Most organic mulches will eventually decompose and disappear into the new turf. Newly planted or sodded lawns have to be kept moist. They should be watered immediately after planting, and then whenever there is not sufficient rainfall.

How much care a lawn requires after it is established depends on the type of grass as well as the homeowner's personal interest. All lawn care pays off, but it is important to mow it at frequent intervals to keep it at the length the particular variety requires; to keep it fertilized and watered appropriately; to control weeds and pests; and to thin, dethatch and aerate when needed. Of course, it is always smart to buy a good quality of grass, fertilizer, weed and pest control products from a reputable dealer who knows local requirements.

A good lawn is a rewarding achievement and autumn lawn care can help keep it green and healthy. The consumer website www.VirginiaGardening.com has additional gardening information.

The Virginia Green Industry Council is the voice of the horticulture industry in the Commonwealth and is dedicated to enhancing the beauty of the state's environment, the well-being of our citizens, improving our state's economy, and improving the health and wellness for everyone in Virginia. The Council is made up of providers and consumers of horticultural products and services. It works to provide public and industry education, environmental guidelines and other information that will keep Virginia green and growing. More information at: www.viriniagreen.org; 540-382-0943 FAX: 540-382-2716; info@viriniagreen.org