

Fall Lawn Care

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SPEAKERS

Adam Thoms, Christa Hartsook

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- C** Christa Hartsook 00:15
Hello, and welcome to the Small Farms Podcast, a production of the Small Farms Program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life. In this episode, I visit with Adam Thoms, assistant professor and extension turfgrass, specialist at Iowa State University to talk about fall lawncare. I'm Christa Hartsook, Small Farms Program Coordinator, and we hope you enjoy the show. Adam, welcome. Thanks for being on.
- A** Adam Thoms 00:44
Yeah, thanks for having me.
- C** Christa Hartsook 00:46
So it's been pretty dry throughout most of the state of Iowa. And I know you're getting a lot of questions on whether or not it's still okay to seed our lawns this fall?
- A** Adam Thoms 00:56
Yeah, that's probably the number one question right now. And to be honest with you, it's absolutely okay to seed. Go ahead, get that seed out. This is the time of the year that we want to see, because we don't have to compete against the summer annuals that can

take over your yard, you know, you think about crabgrass, foxtail, things like that. They're not germinating this time of year. And so you're gonna have a much better stand next year, and hopefully going to get more timely fall rains to kind of help with the grass establishment. So go ahead and seed, put the seed out like you normally would, and fill in those bare spots have been damaged.

C Christa Hartsook 01:31

Good to know. So along those same lines, then Adam, is this a good time to fertilize in the fall?

A Adam Thoms 01:37

Yep. Yep, this is the most important time to fertilize. What this does is you give the plant the nutrients for the next growing season. And so the plant takes those up right now it's going to store them in the base, and then that's going to help with spring coming out of dormancy and then stress tolerance through the next growing season. So if we have another follow up, it's very important to have that strong base of nutrients already stored in the plant.

C Christa Hartsook 02:03

Okay. Adam, I know you're getting questions, too, on bringing that lawn back this fall. And you know, how much water would that take? Is that something we need to be doing? How would you answer that question?

A Adam Thoms 02:15

Yeah. So you know, if you want to bring your yard out of dormancy, the first thing I'm going to tell you is this and that's every time the plant comes in and out of dormancy, it uses up its carbohydrate reserves, so it's using up food. And so that's really stressful on the plant. So if you plan on bringing your yard out of dormancy, then you need to plan to stick with it throughout the fall. Because the last thing we want to do is you know, if it continues to stay dry, have it come out of dormancy and then have it go right back in. So if you want to do that, the best thing to do would be to shoot to apply about an inch of water per week. And we would typically say, apply that inch in three different settings. So we're three different days. So you're not just soaking it all at once. And then once it's out of dormancy, you know, then it can survive at three quarters down to maybe a half inch, depending on how well established your yard is throughout the fall, making sure it gets that so you know the rains that we're getting some weeks where you get three quarters of

an inch of rain, if it's already broke dormancy, it's fine, you don't have to add extra water. But if you go two weeks, you know without any water, you're gonna need to go ahead and continue to water then just to avoid that plant going back and forth.

C

Christa Hartsook 03:25

Okay. I want to back up a minute to, Adam, and just say if we did want to seed again this fall and kind of redo some of those bare areas and repair any damage that was done throughout the summer months, is there grass seed that maybe is a better option for us or things we should be looking at?

A

Adam Thoms 03:43

Yeah, so you know, if you're concerned about drought, moving forward, maybe your yard always kind of looks terrible. Consider a tall fescue yard. Tall fescue is much more drought tolerant than say Kentucky Bluegrass. Kentucky Bluegrass is going to go dormant quicker. And so tall fescue is going to stay greener longer. And a lot of people sent pictures in recently over the last month or so of what is this grass in my yard and it's little pockets of tall fescue that have ended up in their yard but still green and doing well. So, you know, you can make the switch from Kentucky Bluegrass to Tall Fescue and just seed that in, they blend well together when they're both green.

C

Christa Hartsook 04:22

Okay, that's a good thing to think about. Adam, there's also you know, this huge path throughout Central Iowa and western and eastern Iowa you know, that been through the middle there that had the extreme storm damage. So I know a lot of folks are looking at trees lost, things down, and now looking at holes in their yard that they really need to repair and kind of fill in. What would you suggest for those areas?

A

Adam Thoms 04:46

Yeah, so you know, your yards going through a shift so it was a probably a heavy shaded yard and now you've got this large hole that's probably full sun. And so Kentucky Bluegrass does really well in full sun. Perennial ryegrass does fairly decent so I would get a bluegrass rye grass blend to seed in there, you probably if you had a very shady yard and now those trees are gone, you probably had more of a fine fescue type in there, and that's not going to do well. So I would get a Kentucky Bluegrass rye grass blend to put in there and get that planted as soon as possible.



Christa Hartsook 05:18

Okay, great. Fall is also a great time to I know take care of some weeds that we're seeing in the lawn as well. Should we be spraying even if that lawn is dormant already?



Adam Thoms 05:30

Yeah, so broadleaf weed control is best if done in the fall. And we typically promote spraying after the first frost. For two reasons. One, after the first frost, you don't have to worry about any kind of, you know, if you get close to your annual flowers, there wouldn't be any concerns of drift or anything like that. And so you can wait and you know, not have to worry about that. The other reason is after the first frost, it flips a kind of a hormonal switch in the broadleaf plants saying, hey, whatever I take up has to go to my growth point to store as a food reserve. And so you're going to have better movement of the herbicide in the plant. And it's actually going to help better control and kill of the weeds. So let's try to wait till after the first frost, if we're still dormant on the yards at that point, the weeds are still growing, they'll still take up the herbicide just fine.



Christa Hartsook 06:18

Okay. Are there some weeds that are best controlled in the fall, then Adam? Kind of as a follow up question.



Adam Thoms 06:24

Yeah, they're really hard to control weeds typically are better controlled in the fall. So your wild violets, your creeping Charlie, those types of weeds, thistles, those all are pretty well controlled in the fall.



Christa Hartsook 06:36

Okay, good to know. How about tree leaves, you know, we're going to be entering that time when all of our deciduous trees start losing their leaves. And I know a lot of people think, oh, we've got to rake all those up and get them off the lawn, you're probably going to tell people a different solution.



Adam Thoms 06:51

Yep. Yep, one of the best things you can do is it's kind of like a free fertilizer. And so go ahead and chop those leaves up, mulch those back into the yard, the key is to make sure

that the leaves are small enough that they fall down into the canopy, and they don't smother out the grass. So you may have to go over the yard two different directions if you have a large pile of leaves. But we've done studies where we've had an 18 inch tall pile of leaves, we had to mow that four different directions to get it chopped up small enough, but it worked out in the canopy. And we had really nice results in the spring. Very green turf in that spot.



Christa Hartsook 07:25

Yeah, awesome. That's great to know. Is fall also a good time then to think about aeration in our lawn, Adam?



Adam Thoms 07:31

Yeah, fall is a great time for aeration. Again, that's you know, poking the holes in the yard just to try to relieve some compaction, also improve gas exchange in that soil. And so you know, it's a great time to try to do that. I would say if you're going to add some seed to your yard, go ahead and aerify first, and then throw the seed right behind it. A lot of weeds come up in those holes.



Christa Hartsook 07:53

Okay, good to know, I know we hear a lot about people with concerns of grubs, you know, overwintering in the lawn and really doing a lot of damage in that spring and through those early summer months. Is that something we need to worry about now?



Adam Thoms 08:06

Yeah, so grubs are gonna overwinter in your yard if they're there. Unfortunately, right now is not the time to treat for them. The way we control grubs in turf, is that they actually have to take up some of the insecticide. And so if they're overwintering, they're not hurting the yard any. And so don't do any kind of grub control applications. From now on. It's just wasting product and money. Go ahead if you have concerns about grubs or you've had past damage, to try to apply something like around Memorial Day next year is when you need to do that to prevent your damage for next year.



Christa Hartsook 08:39

Okay, good to know we don't need to waste any money or time at this point.

A Adam Thoms 08:43
Nope, nope.

C Christa Hartsook 08:44
Is this also a good time then Adam to think about some fallen maintenance on our lawn mower, before we put that away for the winter?

A Adam Thoms 08:50
Yeah, that's a really good thing to do, you know, change the oil, make sure the air filters cleaned out the air filter is going to be really important to check especially after this dry growing season that we've had. A lot of dust in the air, you know, that can really lower the performance of the mower. And so make sure that's cleaned out, you might have to replace it, always good to check the oil or change it depending how many hours you had on it. And then finally, sharpen the blades. You know, when you mow leaves, things like that the big windstorm that we've had. There's a lot of small twigs down. And so you know a lot of people just mow those up. So they've dinged up their blades. A sharp mower blade is going to be healthier on the grass, it's going to cause less problems. So that's really important there too. So make sure to get sharp blades for the spring or just go ahead and sharpen them up now and then, you know, mow once in the spring and then sharpen them up again for the growing season. That would give you good control that way to have healthy grass from the sharp mower blade.

C Christa Hartsook 09:46
That's great. Great advice. Adam, is there anything else that we need to really think about this fall in preparation for a healthy stand next spring?

A Adam Thoms 09:54
Yeah, so one of the last things that I typically get approached on is a late season fertilizer application. And that's a really good idea. So everyone thinks about applying now for fertilizer. But you know, if you can apply it one more time, say mid October, that's really going to give you the extra step up to the next growing season. And so that extra push of nutrients again, that plants just going to store that as food reserves and use that throughout the early spring into the summer months when it's really hot and dry. And that that'll really set your yard up for better performance next year. So, you know, it's that late fall application of fertilizer that's really going to set you apart from your neighbor.



Christa Hartsook 10:32

Okay, good advice. Adam. Is there a spot we could send folks to For more information or any additional publications that they might need to look for?



Adam Thoms 10:41

Yeah, the extension store has several publications on the Iowa State website that you can go to, many of those are free. We also have a turf grass weed control for professionals handbook there for those lawn aficionados that want to know every weed in their yard how to kill that and so that's there for purchase for cost to it's got a lot of nice pictures, things like that if someone wants that as well.



Christa Hartsook 11:03

Okay, great. Adam, thanks so much for being on today. We appreciate it.



Adam Thoms 11:07

Yeah, thanks for having me. Appreciate it.



11:09

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