



Fall Maintenance of No Mow Lawn



The fine fescue grasses in Prairie Nursery's No Mow Lawn Seed Mix require minimal of care, but there are a few steps that can be taken in the fall to improve turf quality and promote better growth in the following spring.

OVERSEEDING

Fall is the best time to overseed any open areas that result from damage due to animals, construction activities, heavy traffic, or summer fungal diseases. The areas to be reseeded should be lightly worked up or scratched with a rake to expose the soil prior to seeding. The seed can be sprinkled into the open soil, raked in lightly, and firmed by stepping on the soil to firm it. Watering for the first 2 - 3 weeks helps stimulate germination and growth. Starter fertilizer should be used only if your soil is low in nutrients. A soil test always should be conducted before adding fertilizer, lime, sulfur, or other soil amendments (see below).

DE-THATCHING

Fine fescue grasses tend to develop a thatch layer just below the soil surface due to the accumulation of dead root material over time. No Mow lawns that are not mowed regularly (every month or so) also tend to develop a "mat" of dead grass material that can make a lawn appear "spotty" and not as full as a mowed lawn. The buildup of thatch and mat slows the emergence of new growth in the spring, so that unmowed fescue lawns appear brown long after mowed lawns have greened up.

These conditions can be addressed in two ways:

- 1) Dethatching – The thatch is removed manually using a dethatching rake, or with a machine that aggressively

"combs" out the thatch from the grass. Dethatching is best done in fall, but is also effective when conducted in mid-spring. A lawn that green the following spring.

- 2) Close Mowing – Late in the fall when night time temperatures have been below freezing for an extended period of time (November to early December), the No Mow lawn can be mowed close to the ground to clean away the year's growth and remove the mat layer. This can be done by setting your mower on its lowest setting, or by using a string trimmer (weed whacker) to mow right down to the ground. The mowed material should be bagged during mowing or raked up afterwards. Close mowing should never be done during the growing season, as it will scalp the lawn and severely harm the fine fescue grasses. However, close mowing can be safely done in late fall once the grasses begin to enter winter dormancy. Mowing in early spring is more difficult than in fall, as the grass becomes matted down over winter, and is often wet and harder to mow.

AERATING

Lawns on heavy soils with a high clay content often suffer from compaction and poor air transfer to the roots, which require air to breathe and stay healthy. Aeration helps to open up these soils, promoting better root growth and an overall healthier lawn. Aeration is typically done using a machine that removes plugs of soil from the lawn. The resulting holes are then filled with a lighter material, such as a sand and compost mix. This promotes better air flow in the soil and healthier plant growth.

Since the fine fescue grasses in the No Mow Lawn Mix grow best on well-drained sandy and loamy soils, compaction is usually less of an issue than on clay based soils, which are easily

compacted. If your No Mow Lawn was seeded on a sandy soil, you should not have to worry about aerating your lawn. Sandy loam soils that are subjected to heavy foot traffic or vehicle use may become compacted, and require occasional aerating. Vegetation must be killed or removed. Existing lawn grass, weeds, and other plants will compete with the No Mow seeds for nutrients, moisture, and sunlight. All perennial weeds must be eliminated prior to seeding. Perennial weeds such as quackgrass, brome grass, thistles, creeping goldenrods and other aggressive plants will present a long-term problem if not controlled prior to seeding your No Mow turf. Annual weeds which are present in the soil as seeds can require your attention in early going (establishment stage), but should not pose a long-term threat.

TREE LEAF REMOVAL & MULCHING

Since the fine fescue grasses in the No Mow Lawn mix are the most shade tolerant turf grasses available, they are often seeded in shady areas with trees in the overstory. If the leaves of deciduous trees are allowed to accumulate and mat down on the lawn, they will smother the grass. Oak leaves are particularly problematic, because they are high in tannins and are not readily broken down by soil micro-organisms.

There are two methods for handling tree leaves:

- 1) Raking – Simply rake off the leaves once they have (all) fallen from the trees. This leaves a nice green carpet of No Mow that will green up ASAP in spring.
- 2) Use a mulching mower to finely chop up the leaves so they cannot mat down on the grass and smother it. It may require two or three passes with a mulching mower to chop up the leaves sufficiently.

The needles of white pines and red pines do not harm the fine fescue grasses in the No Mow lawn. Spruce needles contain more complex organic compounds and break down more slowly, but generally will not harm an established No Mow lawn. The fine fescue grasses are particularly tolerant of the acid soil conditions that are created by the needles of conifer trees.

FALL FERTILIZING

While fine fescues grasses require only a minimum of Nitrogen (we do not recommend using nitrogen fertilizer on No Mow), they can often benefit from the addition of Phosphorus and Potassium in early fall, if your soil is low in these nutrients. Acid soils can also benefit from fall-applied lime. Highly alkaline soils also respond well when elemental sulfur is applied in fall to reduce the alkalinity of the soil.

Always test your soil before adding fertilizer or other soil amendments such as lime, sulfur, etc. In many cases, lawns already have sufficient nutrients. The addition of fertilizer in such cases is a waste of time and money, and may lead to unnecessary runoff of nutrients into adjacent surface waters, streams, lakes, etc.

The best time to conduct a soil nutrient test is in late summer or early fall (late August to early September). This provides a good estimate of the soil nutrient conditions in advance of fall fertilizing.

Fall is the best time to apply fertilizer to lawns composed of cool season grasses such as the fine fescues, since these grasses have a strong late season growth spurt that builds their root systems for the following year.

Most loamy and sandy loam soils seldom require fertilizing, if ever. However, dry sandy soils are often acidic and have a low nutrient holding capacity. The first step in amending sandy soils is to check the pH to see if liming is necessary. Lime is essential in facilitating the availability of nutrients in the soil. Without correcting the pH with lime, the addition of fertilizer can be a futile and expensive waste of time.

A simple soil test for the following nutrients will determine what, if any additional nutrients your soil requires to grow a good lawn: pH (acidity – alkalinity), Calcium, Magnesium, Phosphorus, Potassium.

Certain soils may be low in trace elements such as Iron, Sulfur, Boron, Manganese, but this is rare. Tests for these micronutrients are also available. These elements are most often in short supply on dry rocky, sandy soils, and sometimes in peat soils derived from bogs and swamps.

In the event you are unable to test your lawn and the grasses appear to be suffering from a nutrient deficiency, you can apply a simple 3-1-2 fertilizer in early to mid fall to provide additional nutrition to the grass. The three numbers refer to the three macronutrients that all plants require for healthy growth (Nitrogen, Phosphorus, Potassium). Never apply fertilizers that are high in Nitrogen. This promotes lush leaf growth, but does not help build the all-important root system of the fescues in No Mow. Increased leaf growth also hastens the formation of thatch, and requires more frequent mowing.

CONCLUSION

Fall is the best time to do most lawn maintenance activities. The soils are usually drier and not saturated with moisture, as commonly occurs in spring. This makes it easier to perform over-seeding, mowing, dethatching, aeration, and other lawn maintenance activities. Come spring, your lawn maintenance will be minimal, so you can focus on other gardening and leisure activities!

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