

Warm-Season Turfgrass Fall/Winter Preparation

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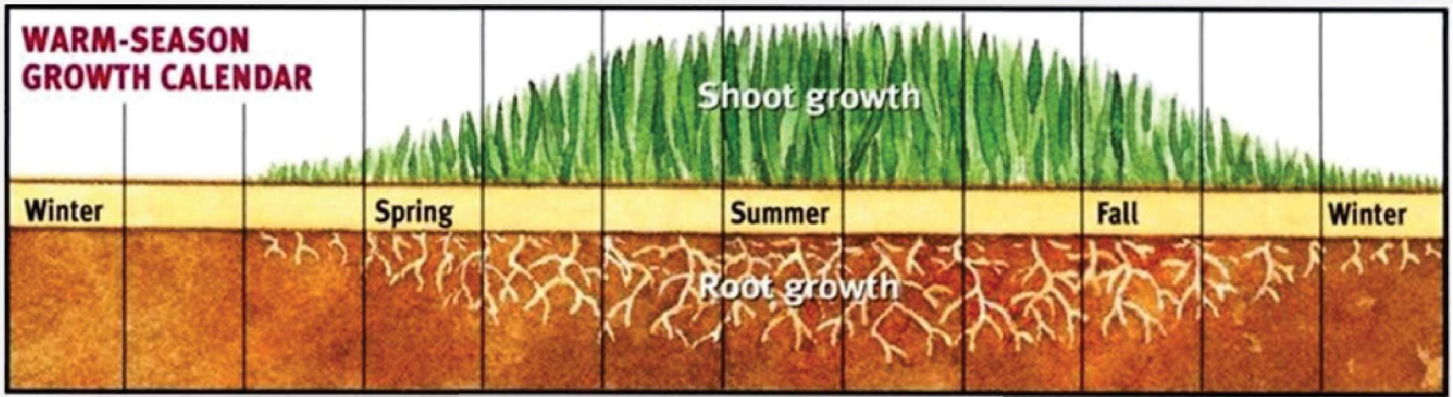
For many Texans, September typically means cooler temperatures, rain showers, and the end of the long hot summer. This change of seasons has an effect on the growth of warm-season grasses like St. Augustinegrass, zoysiagrass, and bermudagrass. Turfgrass should enter the fall and winter seasons in peak health to minimize potential winter injury and prevent spring diseases. Three management practices to focus on this fall and winter are watering, mowing, and fertilizing. Adjusting these to match the seasonal change can create a strong healthy lawn throughout the fall and into winter dormancy.

Watering

As the days get shorter and temperatures become cooler, the growth rate of grass slows down, therefore less water is necessary to maintain plant health. This drop in water need can be $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$ of what is required in summer. Overwatering during this time of year can encourage warm-season turfgrass diseases such as large patch (caused by *Rhizoctonia solani*) and take-all root rot (caused by *Gaeumannomyces graminis*). Both are fungal diseases brought on by cool, moist conditions. Watering early in the morning improves efficiency, and reduces the amount of time turfgrass is exposed to moisture which also helps prevent diseases. When temperatures drop below 70°F, automatic irrigation should be stopped and done only as necessary under dry weather conditions. Follow local watering recommendations to prevent overwatering. Websites like Water My Yard (watermyyard.org) and the Texas ET Network (texaset.tamu.edu) provide weekly watering advice based on local weather information so you know whether to water or not. Some of these services are app-based as well. Check for availability in your local area.

Mowing

The slowdown in turfgrass growth naturally comes with a slowdown in mowing frequency. However, the mowing done during this period can have an impact on winter dormancy and spring green-up. Consider raising the mower height a bit, but do not exceed the recommended height of cut for your turfgrass. Raising the cut height will encourage deeper root growth below ground, aiding in overwintering. The taller grass also shades to soil, helping with moisture retention and preventing the germination of winter weeds. Always follow the 1/3 mowing rule. Finally, a sharp cut is best for your lawn any time of year, so take advantage of the season and sharpen your mower blades.



Fertilizing

Fall lawn fertilization can be tricky due to the varied weather we see in Texas. Low plant nitrogen levels can have adverse effects on turfgrass emergence from winter dormancy. However, applying additional nitrogen when current levels are elevated can result in increased disease pressure, winter weed growth, and potential localized water pollution. Fertilizer applications should never exceed 1 lb of nitrogen per 1000 sq-ft. Our recommendation is to apply your final nitrogen fertilization no later than 6 weeks prior to the historical first frost date for your region. It is highly recommended that a soil test be done to confirm the existing nutrient levels before adding fertilizer. If recommended by the soil test, applying fertilizers with potassium (N-P-K) can help reduce winter injury and diseases.

City	First Frost	Last Nitrogen Application
Amarillo	Oct 21 - Oct 31	Sept 10 - Sept 17
Austin	Dec 1 - Dec 10	Oct 20 - Oct 27
Corpus Christi	Dec 21 - Dec 31	Nov 9 - Nov 16
Dallas/Fort Worth	Nov 21 - Nov 30	Oct 10 - Oct 17
El Paso	Nov 1 - Nov 10	Sept 20 - Sept 27
Houston	Dec 1 - Dec 10	Oct 20 - Oct 27
Lubbock	Nov 1 - Nov 10	Sept 20 - Sept 27 ₁
Odessa	Nov 11 - Nov 20	Sept 30 - Oct 7
San Antonio	Nov 21 - Nov 30	Oct 10 - Oct 17

Texas Lawn Companion - aggieturf.tamu.edu

Summary

Remember, observing your local weather conditions and adjusting the lawn care management practices above to match can provide a beautiful lawn that's ready for a nice winter rest without all the guesswork. For additional turfgrass care and maintenance information, contact your County Extension Agent or refer to extension publications below.

References

<https://agrilifelearn.tamu.edu/>:

- Swanson C. and Fipps G. 2023. Landscape Irrigation Efficiency. AGEN-PU-219.
- Chalmers D.R. and James A. McAfee. 2007. Lawn Fertilization for Texas Warm-Season Grasses. E-437.

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- Grubbs B. 2019. Mowing Recommendations for Warm-Season Turfgrasses. ESC-052.
- Young-Ki J. 2013. How to Diagnose and Manage Large Patch Disease in Warm-Season Turfgrass. E-633.
- Young-Ki J. 2012. Take-All Root Rot. E-615.