

Fall Tips for Transitioning to Organic Lawn Care Part

Scarborough Conservation Commission

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Like organic agriculture, the basic principle of organic lawn care is building and maintaining healthy soil. Soil contains millions of beneficial bacteria, fungi, and microorganisms, often called the soil food web. Organic lawn care methods strive to enrich these important parts of the soil through: 1.) aeration, to allow more oxygen, nutrients and moisture into the soil; 2.) composting, to enhance and feed the soil food web; and 3.) adding, if needed, slow-release organic fertilizer to improve soil fertility. Here are a few things you can do this **Fall** to begin building healthy soil for your organic lawn.

- **Aerate** - Aeration loosens the soil so air, water and nutrients can improve root growth and depth. It also increases drainage and reduces thatch. Aerate once a year, preferably in the fall, and then every other year once soil is improved. Core aerators (which remove plugs of soil) can be affordably rented for a few hours or an entire day, or you can hire a lawn care company to aerate for you.
- **Compost** - Raking a thin layer of compost over your lawn will add nutrients and help the soil hold moisture. It also adds important microbes (critters that live in healthy soil) to your lawn. Lightly rake a 1/4-inch layer of compost over the lawn. You'll need about .75 cubic yards of compost for a 1,000 square foot area. Be sure to get finished (NOT steaming hot) compost that is dry, lightweight and smells earthy and sweet.
- **Over-seed** – Over-seeding, or spreading new grass seed over your lawn, is the ideal next step after aerating and topdressing. Low maintenance mixes of fescues and perennial ryegrasses are best suited for Maine's climate (look for a shady seed mix). Adding 5% to 10% white clover to your seed mix will help increase nitrogen in your soil, reducing or eliminating the need for fertilizer. **The best time to over-seed your lawn is mid-August through mid-September.** For best results, spread 1/4 to 1/2 the normal seeding rate recommended on the bag and keep soil lightly watered for three weeks.
- **Fertilize Frugally** - Add fertilizer **only** if the results of your soil test (done in either mid to late spring or early fall) indicates it is needed. Avoid chemical fertilizers that can harm the important critters in the soil. Use slow-release fertilizer that is less likely to wash away into rivers, streams and the marsh. Corn meal gluten is a good choice for slow release, phosphorus-free, slow-release organic fertilizer. Visit beyondpesticides.org/assets/media/documents/bp-37.3-fa17-Fertilizers.pdf for a list of fertilizers compatible with organic landscaping. Use only the amount recommended by soil test results and **apply between mid-August and October 1.** Applying fertilizer in late summer/early fall (as opposed to spring), allows it to feed grass roots, not blades (or weeds), encouraging a strong root system and a thick, healthy lawn.
- **Add lime** – If your soil test shows that you need to adjust your soil's pH, fall is the perfect time to add lime. Maine's soils are typically acidic. Lime, or crushed limestone, will bring the pH closer to 6.0, which is the ideal level for grass.

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- **Lawn Alternatives** - Consider reducing your overall lawn area by planting low-maintenance native trees, shrubs and flower gardens. Native plantings not only beautify your property, they also provide important habitat and food sources for wildlife, birds and pollinators. To learn more, visit cumberlandswcd.org/documents-1/yardscaping and click on Native Plants. There is also lots of helpful information at the Wild Seed Project (wildseedproject.net), University of Maine Cooperative Extension (extension.umaine.edu/gardening/manual/plants-for-the-maine-landscape/) and Audubon Native Plant Database (audubon.org/native-plants).

Information for this article was drawn from the following sources: Cumberland County Soil & Water District (cumberlandswcd.org/yardscape), Friends of Casco Bay (cascobay.org/bayscaping), Univ. of Maine Cooperative Extension (extension.umaine.edu/gardening/manual/lawns), Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (mofga.org/Publications/Fact-Sheets) and Northeast Organic Farmers Association (organiclandcare.net). Visit their websites for more detailed information.