

TIMELY INFORMATION

Agriculture & Natural Resources

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Why You SHOULD NOT Winterize Your Lawn

Visit the garden center at one of the “big box” retail outlets this time of year and you’ll see stacks and stacks of fertilizer for sale for winterizing your lawn. There may be TV advertisements promoting fall fertilization of some of the premium fertilizer products. There are even instructions as to how much to apply along with all the many benefits fall fertilization has for your lawn grass.

What’s in a winterizing fertilizer?

Most fertilizers sold for fall lawn application will contain some nitrogen (the first number on the bag), maybe a little phosphorus (the middle number), and always some potassium (the last number). One popular, premium lawn fertilizer that is promoted for winterizing lawns is a 22-3-14 grade fertilizer. The company claims that the nitrogen (N) strengthens grass roots for winter, and their product has the appropriate amount for the season. The phosphorus (P or P_2O_5) helps the plant to store and transfer energy. Finally, a healthy dose of potassium (K or K_2O) protects the lawn during winter as it promotes tolerance to cold weather and foot traffic. Some premium winterizing fertilizers also contain a slow-release source of nitrogen and may contain a herbicide for winter weed control.

Winterizer is not for bermuda, centipede, zoysia, and St. Augustine.

However, if you visit the web site of the company that promotes the 22-3-14 winterizing fertilizer and study their recommendations carefully, you’ll learn that they do not recommend this practice for bermudagrass, centipedegrass, zoysiagrass, or St. Augustinegrass. The practice of winterizing lawns is strictly for cool-season grasses such as those found in lawns from North Alabama northward. Since most of the customers for the big box retail outlets live in the upper South, Midwestern, and Northeastern U.S. where fescue, bluegrass, bentgrass and other cool-season grasses dominate, the premium fertilizer companies target their sales to these customers. Fescues, bluegrasses, etc. grow in cool weather and remain green through the winter. Here in the Deep South, these perennial, cool-season grasses rarely survive our hot summers but they thrive in the cool summers of New England and the Upper Midwest. In order to maintain these grasses through the harsh winters of these areas, fall fertilization or winterizing is definitely recommended.

More harm than good

Attempting to “winterize” a warm-season grass (bermuda, zoysia, centipede, and St. Augustine) with fall fertilization may actually harm the grass. These grasses go dormant or semi-dormant during our winter months. They produce very little if any growth from October through April in Central Alabama. A fall application of nitrogen may actually stimulate them into producing succulent growth which will only set the grass up for severe damage when a frost or freeze does occur. Auburn University’s Soil Test Recommendation for these grasses state clearly that nitrogen should be applied “. . . up to September 1.” Later applications are risky.

Produce a healthy sod during the summer.

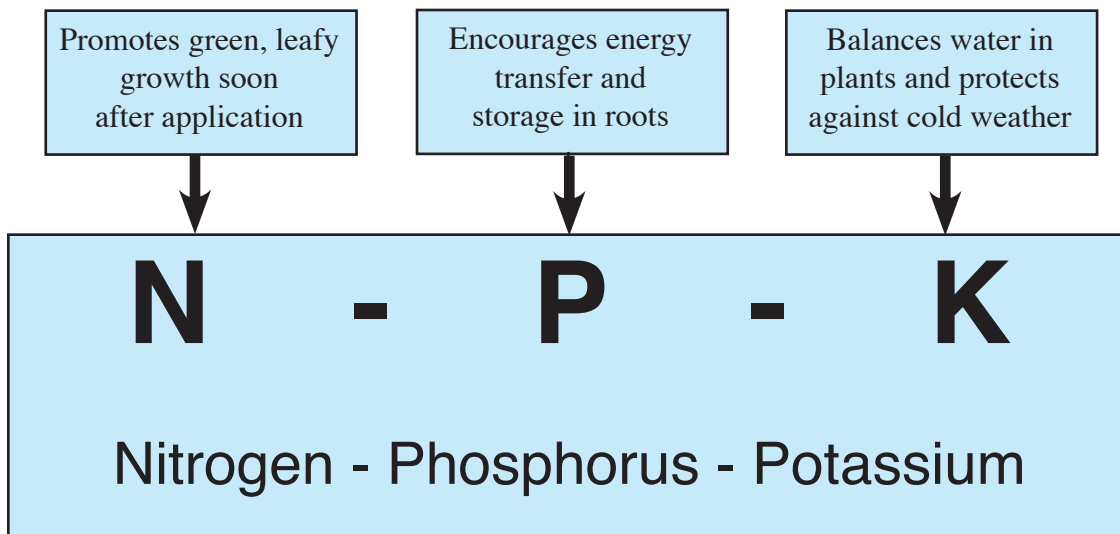
Adding phosphorus or potassium to warm season grasses in the fall is a wasted effort. Growth is slowing down dramatically. Root reserves are already established for next spring's growth. A warm season lawn establishes a healthy root system during the summer growing season. Adding more nutrients in the fall won't make the grass healthier. The good news is that adding phosphorus or potassium to the soil won't hurt the grass. They are just wasted nutrients. Unfortunately, most winterizing fertilizers contain nitrogen which promotes undesirable, green, leafy growth in the fall.

But I have a fescue lawn

Because fescue, bluegrass, bentgrass and overseeded ryegrass grow rapidly during the cool days of autumn, it can use a fall fertilizer containing nitrogen. The Auburn University Soil Testing Laboratory actually recommends about 1 pound N per 1,000 square feet in the fall. If you decide to use the 22-3-14 grade fertilizer mentioned above, this would be about 4.5 pounds per 1,000 square feet [(1 lb /0.22) = 4.5 lb]. This would be about 4 and one-half pints of the 22-3-14 fertilizer. The phosphorous and potassium in the fertilizer may or may not be needed by the fescue but it won't hurt anything. Our winters are generally not cold enough to harm cool-season grasses so applying the P and K in the fall is not as critical as it would be further north.

Summary.

Don't apply fertilizer in the fall to warm-season grasses. "Winterizer" fertilizers may help cool-season grasses such as fescue and bluegrass, but they could actually harm bermuda, zoysia, centipede, and St. Augustine that are dormant during our winter months.



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