

FALL IS FOR PLANTING

Experts know that the best time to install plants is in the fall, and this rule of thumb goes for trees, shrubs, perennials and even lawns. Why is fall the best time? Here are a few reasons:

- Soil warmed throughout the summer encourages root growth.
- Already in the ground, the plant will have a head start in spring.
- Rainfall tends to be more dependable in fall.
- Cooler weather discourages pests and diseases.
- Chances are, you'll find more plants on sale in the fall.

So as the weather cools down and you're ready to get back out in the yard, here are some tips for autumn planting. Of course, be sure to consult a knowledgeable employee at your local garden center because these tips are general and some plants must be treated differently. For instance, bare root plants, including roses and fruit trees, should be planted in the winter when they're completely dormant.

How to: Planting Trees and Shrubs

1 Dig a hole large enough in diameter so the root system has at least six inches of clearance on all sides. The root ball should rest on a solid soil foundation, so don't dig the hole much deeper than the ball.

2 Plant the tree or shrub slightly above the level of the surrounding soil. This allows for settling and increased soil drainage.

3 Carefully place the tree or shrub in the hole. Handle the plant by the root ball and not the trunk. A broken ball of earth can mean a dead plant. Always remove any container before you plant.

4 Backfill the hole, using the native soil removed from the hole. It is recommended you do not use soil amendments when planting large shrubs and trees. Fill the hole and firm the soil around the plant. Water thoroughly to settle the soil around the roots and to eliminate any air pockets.

5 Do not fertilize your tree or shrub after planting. Wait until early spring to do this, and even then, go lightly. Heavy applications of fertilizer can burn or injure the root system and possibly kill the plant.



6 Watering is extremely important when transplanting trees and shrubs. At the time of transplanting, soak the root ball and surrounding soil. A thorough watering every seven to 10 days dramatically improves your chance of success. More frequent watering can lead to root rot, so be careful. Remember, more trees and shrubs fail due to over watering than under watering.

7 Before calling it a day, add a few inches of mulch around the base of your newly planted tree or shrub. This helps to keep down weeds and conserve soil moisture. **WARNING:** Do not pile the mulch too deep—four inches max. The infamous “mulch volcano” will do major damage to your new investment.

How to: Planting a Lawn

1 Measure the lawn area to determine how many square feet of coverage you need.

2 Visit your local garden center and talk to a knowledgeable staff member about the best types of grasses for your area. You may also want to contact a local extension office to discuss your options. Consider drought-tolerant varieties if you live where



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water is scarce—lawns are typically a garden's main water user. Another good idea is to get soil tests done on a few different areas of your lawn so you can adjust pH with lime or garden sulfur before you get started.

3 Decide if you want to plant seed or sod. You can start most cool-season grasses (bluegrass, rye, fescue) from either one, but many of the warm-climate varieties (St. Augustine, Bermuda) are typically started from sod.

4 Prepare the ground thoroughly. Weed the area carefully and then till the soil at least six inches. Mix in organic matter when tilling—peat, compost or a mix of topsoil and compost. Rake out as many rocks as possible and smooth and lightly pack the soil using a roller or the backside of a rake.

5a (Seed) Determine the amount of seed mix you need. Each variety is different so follow the directions on the bag or talk to an expert at your local garden center.

6a Seed the lawn using a spreader for more precision than you can achieve spreading by hand. Handheld spreaders are great for small- and medium-sized jobs, but you might want a rolling spreader for larger projects. A rule of thumb is to spread enough seed so that approximately half of the soil is visible—50% seed and 50% soil as you look down at the ground.

7a Cover newly seeded area with a very light layer of topsoil or peat and roll the area again (or walk on it to tamp the soil down) to achieve some compression between the seed and the soil. If you choose to cover the area to discourage birds or keep seed from blowing away, don't go too heavy. Many experts recommend *not* covering the area to reduce mess and avoid hampering growth.

5b (Sod) Purchase sod directly from sod farms or your local garden center. If you live in a very cool climate, it might be a good idea to wait and lay sod in spring.

6b Be sure the delivered sod is in good, healthy shape with moist roots, no yellow or brown grass and that the sod hangs together firmly.

7b Have sod delivered the morning you plan to lay it so it doesn't dry out. If you don't lay sod right away, you'll need to water the rolls enough to keep the roots moist. Don't saturate the roll, though, because it will be impossible to lift and roll out when you are ready.

8 Keep newly seeded areas constantly wet until the seedlings emerge, then switch to twice-weekly watering. Water newly laid sod twice weekly. Make sure the soil stays moist between waterings.



How to: Keep Lawns Healthy

Fall is also the best time to care for your lawn and get it ready for the following spring. Killing weeds, thatching, aerating and overseeding are best done in the fall.

Broadleaf Weeds: In many areas, September and October are the best times to control perennial broadleaf weeds like dandelions and clover. In fall, the weeds prepare themselves for winter by pulling nutrients and starches from their leaves to their roots. By doing this, they also draw herbicides into their root systems, more effectively killing the weed.

Thatch: It's the buildup of living and dead grass roots and stems between the soil and the actual green grass blades. As thatch builds up it can lead to a lot of lawn problems. Check the amount of thatch in your lawn by cutting three or four inches into the grass with a shovel and lifting out a piece of sod. If thatch is more than ½-inch thick, you should aerate or thatch your lawn in the fall or following spring. For thatch more than ¾ inches thick, aerate and then topdress the area with a thin layer of peat or compost to speed the breakdown of thatch.

Overseeding: If you want to keep a healthy lawn, you will have to overseed from time to time, even if just to compensate for the slowdown in grass reproduction that's bound to occur after a few years. Experts recommend overseeding lawns every three or four years. The process is fairly straightforward:

1 Mow your lawn at the lowest setting, even if it scrapes the soil a little.

2 Rake the area with a grass rake, removing as much debris as possible. If your seed is sitting on thatch and debris, it will not germinate.

3 Distribute seed according to the directions on the package. There should be overseeding rates, as well as new seed instructions. Use more than is recommended because the goal is a tight-growing lawn.

4 Water the area until the soil is moist. Continue watering daily for a couple weeks and do not let the soil dry out between waterings.

5 Mow the overseeded lawn when the old grass reaches three inches high. ✂

By Bill Calkins with help from the experts at John Deere Landscapes and Texas Cooperative Extension.