

## Preparing Your Lawn for Winter

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Most of our southern warm-season lawn grasses rate poorly for cold tolerance when compared to cool-season grasses. When temperatures drop below twenty degrees Fahrenheit grasses like centipede and St. Augustine can suffer freeze damage. A number of factors influence their tolerance to cold. Fortunately there are some steps you can take to minimize the damage to your lawn.



Of most importance is to maintain a healthy lawn. Proper watering, mowing and fertilizing will build a strong root and stem system which can withstand the effects of the cold. If these have been your normal practices your lawn should be fine. To remind you of what you should have been doing to your lawn during the growing season, allow me to offer this quick review.

Water your lawn only when it is needed. Wait until it shows some sign of wilt. The leaves begin to turn gray and they fold. This happens about five to seven days after the last good rain. Then water deeply, about one half to three quarters of an inch at a time to make sure the moisture penetrates to the entire root system. This will help develop a deeper and stronger root system. Remember, watering too frequently can be just as bad as not watering at all.

Mow your grass at the highest height possible. Too often we mow our grass too short and weaken it. To give you something to think about consider this theory. 'The taller the grass grows the deeper its roots go'. Set your mower blade for a minimum of one and a half inches for mowing centipede and three inches for mowing St. Augustine. This is extremely important for the last several mowings prior to fall. Higher mowing heights allow the turf to produce and store more root carbohydrates. Scalping the lawn will cut off its food supply.

Proper fertilization is a key element in a healthy lawn. The general tendency is to over-fertilize. Some grasses, especially centipede, do very poorly if over-fertilized. Centipede grass can generally get by on one fertilization a year. St. Augustine may benefit from two fertilizations, one in the spring about three weeks after the grass has greened up and a second application in August or early September. For best results, use a fertilizer in the ratio of 15-0-15, nitrogen-phosphorous-potassium, with at least half of the nitrogen listed as slow release or water-insoluble.

What about the use of winterizer lawn fertilizers? These are products that have a high ratio of potassium (the third number in the analysis, nitrogen is the first) to nitrogen.. There is some evidence that an increased potassium to nitrogen ratio in the plant tissue will increase the hardiness of lawn grass. Whether you can increase this ratio by using a winterizer will depend on the specific analysis of the fertilizer you use. If the ratio of potassium to nitrogen is two or better, there is a chance that it will increase the ratio in the plant tissue. Examples of good

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winterizer fertilizers are 5-0-15 or 5-0-20. Don't apply a winterizer any later than late September.

However, if you have applied a 15-0-15 fertilizer in August, as recommended for St. Augustine, your grass's potassium to nitrogen ratio may be high enough already, because the potassium remains in the soil longer than does the nitrogen. The only sure way to determine the potassium level in your soil is to run a soil test. Then you can make an educated decision on using a winterizer. If you are interested, stop by the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County at 615 Paul Russell Road to pick up a soil test mailing kit. Office hours are 8-5, Monday through Friday. Phone 487-3004 if you would like more information. You may also visit the website at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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