

Do You Need to Use a Winterizer Fertilizer on Your Florida Lawn?



Photo, credit to Scripps Institution of Oceanography: If you choose to use a winterizer fertilizer on your Florida lawn, be sure to select the proper type.

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Around this time every year questions come in about using winterizer fertilizers on lawns. Advertisements for lawn winterizers will start to appear in the weekly garden section of this paper. Do you need to use a winterizer? The answer will depend on how well you have maintained your lawn during the growing season and the potassium level of your soil. Perhaps the best way to answer the question is to discuss just what the winterizer is intended to do.

The warm season grasses common to this area, Centipede grass and St. Augustine grass, have poor tolerance to extreme cold, especially when temperatures change suddenly. A sudden cold snap will seriously damage these lawns. Winterizers are fertilizers with a high ratio of potassium (K) to nitrogen (N). . The potassium helps the buildup of carbohydrates and proteins in the root system, making them more likely to resist the cold and survive the winter. This then is a good thing. Taken by itself, however, it is no substitute for good lawn care.

The same result can be realized by properly maintaining your lawn during the regular season. There is really no better substitute for preventing freeze damage than good lawn maintenance. You will hear this from us whenever we write about lawn care. Proper watering, mowing and fertilizing will build a strong root and stem fiber system which can resist the effects of cold as well as drought. 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 please allow a quick review.

Water only when needed. Wait until the grass shows some sign of wilt, 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 you penetrate

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the entire root system. This will develop a deep strong root system. Too much water, however, is worse than not enough.

Mow your grass as high as possible. Many people around these parts cut their grass too short. Remember, the grass leaves are the manufacturers of the food for the plant through photosynthesis. The greater the surface area the more food they can produce. This is particularly important if you are trying to grow grass in a shady area. Consider this theory. "The taller the grass the deeper and stronger the roots." Set your mower for a minimum of one and one half inches for Centipede and three inches for St. Augustine . Use four inches if you are growing it in shade. This is extremely important during the last month or so of the growth season to allow the turf to produce and store as much food in the roots root as possible. Think of it as a bear getting ready to hibernate. It will feed heavily to get ready for its winter sleep. Once your grass turns brown it can no longer feed itself. Scalping the lawn before it has a chance to feed its roots is like cutting its throat.

If you have a lawn service be sure to specify what you want. This may take some serious discussion. For some reason most of their customers want their lawns cut short and they don't want to go to the trouble of resetting their mowers. If we could only convince those customers that an added benefit to longer grass is fewer weeds.

Now back to the original issue. Should you winterize or not? I fertilized my St. Augustine lawn in mid August with a 15-0-15 fertilizer containing 7.5 percent slow release nitrogen. This should provide enough potassium to do what a winterizer would do. If you have fertilized this August and you mow to the correct height then there should be no need to winterize. The only way to be really sure is to check the potassium level in your soil by having your soil tested. For help in getting your soil tested stop by the UF-IFAS Leon County Extension at 615 Paul Russell Road and pick up a mailing kit to have your soil tested at the university lab.

If you didn't fertilize in August, you may wish to use a winterizer now. If so, select a winterizer with at least a two to one ratio of potassium(K) to nitrogen(N). Good examples that may be found locally are 5-0-15 or 5-0-20. Then fertilize at the rate of one-half pound of nitrogen per thousand square feet of lawn area. It is important to go easy on the nitrogen this late in the season. You do not want to stimulate too much top growth which may not be able to harden off before the first frost. Don't apply this fertilizer any later than early October.

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