

Whole Cycle Tuesday

Takeaway

Once growth stops, reduce wear. Avoid repeated traffic on frost covered and wet turf. Damage can accumulate faster and the lawn cannot repair itself.

Hardening off develops gradually, and warm spells followed by sudden cold can still cause injury. The goal of fall turf management is to help grass enter winter healthy, with stored energy and time to acclimate.

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*"Nature does not hurry,
yet everything is
accomplished."*

— Lao Tzu

Preparing for Winter: Why Grass Goes Dormant

As autumn days shorten and temperatures drop, lawns across New England begin preparing for winter. Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, and fescues typically grow well in early fall, then slow as colder weather settles in. Winter dormancy is a survival strategy: growth largely pauses while living crowns, the growing points near the soil surface, remain ready to produce new shoots when favorable conditions return. Grass may lose color, but browning alone does not mean it has died.

Shorter days and falling temperatures signal this seasonal transition. Hardening off, also called cold acclimation, increases the plant's ability to tolerate freezing. Grass accumulates sugars and other protective compounds, changes its cellular chemistry, and reduces water content in crown tissues. These adjustments help protect living cells from cold injury. Dormancy and hardening off are related, but different: one slows growth, while the other builds cold tolerance. A lawn can also become dormant during summer drought without being prepared for winter.

Fall management helps by supporting healthy turf before growth shuts down. Appropriate fertilization during active fall growth helps grass recover from summer stress and maintain the leaf area needed to capture sunlight.

Excess nitrogen as plants begin acclimating can encourage lush growth and increase susceptibility to winter injury. Use soil testing and guidance to determine nutrient needs, don't assume every lawn needs a heavy winter application. Correct deficiencies when testing identifies them. Avoid fertilizing dormant turf or frozen ground.

Keep mowing while the grass continues growing, maintaining a suitable height for the species and removing no more than one-third of the blade at a time. Scalping removes leaf area the plant needs to make and store energy. Leaves also need attention: mulch light accumulations into small pieces, but collect heavy layers that cover the turf. A wet mat of leaves blocks sunlight and traps moisture, weakening grass before winter and creating conditions favorable for disease.

Healthy soil and sensible watering also support the transition. If autumn is dry, provide enough water to prevent drought stress while the lawn is still active, without leaving the soil saturated. Good drainage reduces the risk of standing water and damaging ice around crowns. Where compaction is a problem, complete core aeration early enough in fall for active turf to recover. Overseeding likewise needs time for seedlings to establish before winter; late disturbance can leave plants vulnerable heading into freezing weather.

