

Timely Turfgrass Memo

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Preparing Turfgrass for Cold Temperatures: Common Questions

Should I apply potassium to winterize my turfgrass?

There is often conflicting information online about winterizing turfgrass with potassium fertilizer. Most studies show that applying surplus or “bonus” potassium doesn’t improve freeze tolerance or prevent winter injury. Instead, the focus should be on ensuring **sufficient potassium** levels based on a soil test. Nutrient deficiencies increase the likelihood of plant stress, so balance is key. Regular soil testing is the best way to ensure your turfgrass has the nutrients needed for healthy growth and stress tolerance.

What can I do to protect my turfgrass this winter?

Here are a few steps to help reduce the likelihood of winter injury in turfgrass:

- Avoid scalping the turfgrass at this time of year. Scalping can significantly affect turfgrass health and stress tolerance as winter approaches. Maintaining a slightly taller mowing height and mowing frequently to avoid scalping will help ensure roots are deep and healthy going into winter.
- Minimize traffic, especially where other stresses like drought or shade are present. Any stress will increase the chance of damage from winter temperatures. Try to spread out areas where vehicle, foot, or pet traffic is concentrated.
- Don’t let turfgrass areas become too dry over the winter. Dry soil can lead to desiccation, or drying of the plant tissue. Even though some parts of the state are recovering from drought, dry conditions may return before spring. Watering deeply every 3 to 4 weeks during cooler months can help prevent desiccation.

How can I protect my irrigation system?

Homes or facilities with irrigation systems should take steps to protect them from freezing temperatures. Exposed components or water left in the pipes can freeze and cause breakages. Early winter is a good time to address this.

Four Simple Steps:

1. Shut off the water supply. Remember to turn off the timer on automatic systems.
2. Drain the sprinkler system. In Tennessee, it's usually not necessary to drain underground pipes, but it can help to remove rotors by hand, shake out the water, and reattach them.
3. Insulate any exposed components or pipes with foam insulation.
4. Insulate your backflow preventer and valves with leftover insulation material, if possible.