Prepare Your Yard Before the Snow Flies
By Jeff Banks

After a long summer of working in the yard and watching the last leaf fall, will your yard be ready for winter? Think of winter as your off season in your annual landscaping game plan. By following a fall game plan, you can prepare your yard to save time and frustration next spring.

**Lawn Care:** Many homeowners think lawns need less care in the fall because the grass grows more slowly. In fact, just the opposite is true. During this time of year, grass is busily absorbing energy, moisture, and nutrients in preparation for a long, dormant winter. Continue to water and mow your lawn, as needed, throughout the fall.

Then as the season draws to a close, gradually drop the mower’s blade to lower settings for the last two cuttings of the year. That will allow more sunlight to reach the crown of the grass, and there will be less left to turn brown during the winter. As you lower the blade, just remember to not trim off more than one-third of the grass blades at any one time. Apply a final application of fertilizer in early November. Grass roots absorb nitrogen and other nutrients in preparation for spring.

**Leaves:** One of the most time consuming fall yard activities is taking care of leaves. The only individuals that really like the falling leaves of fall are kids, at least the ones that get to play in the raked leaf piles. Removing and keeping leaves from smothering the grass is well worth it and your efforts will be repaid in a lawn ready for mowing in the spring.

There are two basic options for removing leaves, mulching, or raking. One of the easiest ways to gather and shred leaves is to use your lawn mower either with a bagger or without. If you use a bagger, the mower will shred up a nice combination of grass and leaves that can be emptied into your compost bins. Even if you don’t have a bagger on your mower, with some strategic mowing, you can direct the side discharge to gather the shredded leaves and grass into a pile. Then rake up the pile and fill your compost bin or store in garbage bags. When raking leaves, try and remove them as soon as possible. Don’t let the leaves get wet and pile up. Wet leaves can stick together, forming a mat that if left unmoved, will suffocate grass and breed fungal diseases.

**Annuals and Perennials:** Remove annual flowers such as petunias and marigolds by the root after they are killed by hard frost. Once temperatures hit the freezing mark and plants die back, depending on the plant, cut back the stem of most perennials to within an inch or two of the ground. Later in the fall, consider adding light mulch. Renew the top few inches of mulch in flowerbeds to protect perennials from hard freezes. Keep mulch around trees looking more like a doughnut and less like a volcano. This will discourage critters from digging in and feasting on the tree.

**Weed Control:** If broadleaf weeds like dandelions have taken over your lawn, now’s the time to fight back. It doesn’t matter where the weeds are—the vegetable garden, flower beds or the lawn—this is a good time to get rid of them. Consider this: Weeds that are spread by seed produce thousands of seeds. Lambs Quarter can bear up to 72,500 seeds per plant, curly dock can bear up to 30,000, purslane 52,000, and redroot pigweed, 117,000. If even 50% of the pigweed seedlings germinated next spring, you’d have 58,000 pigweed plants to pull or otherwise get rid of.
Better to pull them this fall, or if weeds are in the lawn, to spot-spray a selective herbicide on the still-green perennial weeds. Perennial weeds, such as dandelion, thistle, and bindweed, are more easily eliminated by fall sprays than by summer applications.

**Garden Care:** The garden is an important part of your landscape. After the fall harvest, remove all dead vegetation. Some diseases and pests can overwinter on foliage and fruit left in the garden. Remove all dead plant material and any rotten fruit or vegetables. Healthy vegetation can be added to your compost pile. Most compost piles do not get hot enough to destroy disease or fungus. If your plants were unhealthy with mildew, mold, or blight, haul the plants to the local green waste facility to avoid spreading the disease to your compost pile.

If the soil in landscape beds or the garden needs improving, which it usually does, late fall is the best time to do it. Apply 2 to 3 inches of organic matter such as leaves or compost and till it into the soil. Doing this in the fall allows soil micro-organisms many months to break down the compost in preparation for next year’s plantings. Another advantage to applying compost in the fall is that if it is too hot from excessive salts, the salts will generally leach out over the winter and early spring months.

Fall is a great time to expand the vegetable garden. Consider building a few raised beds. Many garden centers have bagged organic garden soil and compost on sale in the fall. Fill your new beds with fresh soil, adding a layer of mulch, and you will be ready to plant when next spring arrives.

Winter is right around the corner, and before we know it, spring will be here. Taking the extra effort to follow a fall yard game plan will make it easy to begin yard work next spring.