

FALL IN THE DESERT

with our Garden Guru, Craig Bedard

Fall is approaching and with the (long awaited) cooler weather, desert gardening season begins.

Lawns

Why all the dust, allergies and noise? That's from lawn "scalping". Why do we scalp? Bermuda (warm season grass) is not a year round lawn. In fact, it's only green during 2-3 months of the year, therefore, we have to over-seed with a "winter lawn" called Perennial Rye. In the desert, Perennial Rye



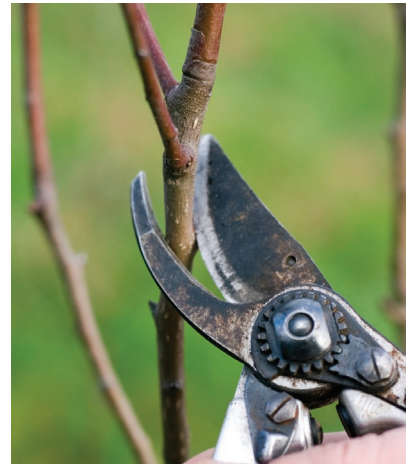
fades away in our summer heat, however, if it were planted on the coast or in cooler climates, it would last year round. Scalping also allows for better water and nutrient penetration.

Scalping is the process of turning off the water to allow the Bermuda to dry out, then mowing the lawn extremely short which removes the build up of "thatch", a thick layer of grass which allows for the new seed to have contact with the soil. Water is applied 3-4 times a day at short intervals to begin the 14 to 21 day germination period. Perennial Rye is not the most water efficient lawn to plant as it requires a lot of water to keep green. Actually, annual scalping is an optional gardening task...it is done in the desert primarily to show off lush green lawns for our winter guests.

A key point to remember in scalping: The process itself has received a lot of criticism from the AQMD (Air Quality Management District) and CVAG (Coachella Valley Association of Governments) because of its PM10 pollutants (see sidebar). A great dust prevention technique is to add water to the dried out grass just before mowing. This will greatly reduce the amount of particulate matter caused by scalping.

Particulate matter pollution consists of very small liquid and solid particles floating in the air. Of greatest concern to public health are the particles small enough to be inhaled into the deepest parts of the lung. These particles are less than 10 microns in diameter - about 1/7th the thickness of a human hair - and are known as PM10. Lawn Scalping Particulate Matter can be greatly reduced by wetting down the dried out lawn just before mowing.

Got a question for our Garden Guru? Craig Bedard invites you to email any questions you may have to **GardenGuru@elementsca.com** Your question and answer could be published in a future issue.



Trimming

Trees should be trimmed this time of year and it is best to do this before re-seeding of lawns. Trimming now prevents any disturbance to emerging winter grass. The aim of any good trimming is to take out the “sail effect” of the tree, which is cross branching and full canopies that high April winds love to knock down causing branches to break. When you have laced out and opened up a tree properly the high winds pass right through with minimal movement to the tree.





Planting & Plant selection

Fall is the best time of year to plant. Cooler weather allows for better rooting and allows time for plants to acclimate themselves to our warmer weather. When deciding what to plant, look for plants that survived the summer heat. These are plants that are good desert “stand bys.” Choose a local nursery that actually grows their plants in the desert or at least, purchases their plants from a local grower. Many mass merchandiser type nurseries bring their plants in from coastal growers and survival in the desert is tough. A reputable, local nursery will carry only desert proven plants and will have employees that are educated horticulturalists or California Certified Nursery Persons, which says a lot.

Fertilizing

September and October are good times to apply fertilizers to our lawns and plants. On our lawns the best time to apply is after the first mowing of newly reseeded lawns. A good fall blend is “Triple 15” (15-15-15 analysis on the bag). What do these numbers represent? The first is the nitrogen content (for greenery and growth), the second is the phosphorus content (for flowering) and the third is the potassium content (for root structure). These fertilizers can be purchased at your local nursery or mass merchandisers. The same fertilizer can be applied to plants as well. If you have a drip system, apply a dry fertilizer by hand and then add water to soak it into the ground or hand water with a liquid fertilizer such as Miracle-Gro. If you simply add a fertilizer into your drip system it will not disburse enough nutrients to the plant. Fertilizer companies are clever with marketing avocado food for avocado trees and citrus food for citrus trees. Don’t be concerned, your avocado will not turn into a citrus and vice versa. When selecting a fertilizer for your fruit trees, a good blend would be 5-20-5, which would provide low nitrogen and high phosphorus levels. Using a higher nitrogen level could prevent some flowering and not produce as much fruit. •



Craig Bedard, owner of Craig’s Landscaping, holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Ornamental Horticulture & Landscape Design from Cal Poly State University, San Luis Obispo and is a California Certified Nurseryman.