

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



July 19, 2025

Renovating a Lawn to Improve It
Annette Meyer Heisdorffer, PhD
Extension Agent for Horticulture Education – Daviess County

What factors are considered when deciding if a lawn needs renovating? Renovation is recommended when more than 50% of the lawn contains weeds, the soil is excessively compacted, to decrease tough to control weeds such as Bermudagrass, or when the turf is damaged by heavy traffic or drought.

Renovating a lawn involves replanting it without tilling the soil and possibly without destroying the existing grass. In some situations, only a few patches need restoring. The best time to renovate a cool-season lawn sown with a turf-type tall fescue is mid-August through September.

In the lawn area with the weeds, apply a non-selective herbicide containing glyphosate. Check the active ingredient listed on the label to ensure the only active ingredient is glyphosate, so that the number of days to wait after application to plant grass seed is before the end of September. Remember that glyphosate kills or injures plants that it touches. It works best when weeds are actively growing. Use the product according to label directions.

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

Depending on the type of weeds, the herbicide may need to be applied again before planting seed. For example, when trying to control Bermudagrass, 2 to 3 applications 2 to 3 weeks apart of glyphosate are needed. Remember, the lawn will need re-establishing in the herbicide-treated area. If you have questions about using an herbicide, please ask before using it. After the final herbicide spraying, wait the number of days listed on the label before planting seed.

Mow the lawn as close as possible and prepare the seedbed. Seed will not germinate and grow properly if it is broadcasted on the soil surface. The seed needs good contact with the soil. A lawn dethatcher or verticut machine can be used to heavily dethatch or thin the lawn. Make sure to go over the area several times in different directions.

Test the soil to determine if lime, phosphate, and potash are needed by bringing a soil sample to the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service. Test results are returned within 10 business days. If the soil needs these amendments, they can be applied to the soil before seeding. Testing for nitrogen is not included because science shows nitrogen is required by growing plants.

After preparing the soil, evenly broadcast 6 pounds of seed per 1000 square feet of a turf-type tall fescue, which is the best cool season grass type for our area. Rake the seeds into the seed bed if you have a small area to renovate, or cross the area again with the dethatching machine.

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

A slit seeder is another way to sow grass seed. The seeder makes slits in the soil and drops seed into the groove, contacting the soil. Make sure to sow 6 pounds per 1000 square feet of turf-type tall fescue seed as well.

Keep the newly seeded area watered. In hot, windy weather, two or three light irrigations per day may be needed until germination is complete. Then water deeply and less frequently to encourage a deep root system. If the thatch is not completely removed, even more frequent watering is needed because the thatch tends to wick water from the seed and almost eliminates germination.

After the seeds germinate, apply 1 pound of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. Farm-type fertilizers, like urea, need to be applied when the lawn is dry and the weather is cool to prevent burning the grass leaves. Otherwise, the fertilizer needs to be watered in right after application; specialty organic turf fertilizers do not need to be watered in, but may cost more. If nitrogen is applied before seeding in the renovation process, weed growth is encouraged.

To thicken a thin stand of tall fescue turfgrass with no weed problems, prepare the seedbed with a coring machine that removes 1/2- to 1-inch long cores of soil from the top and redeposits them on the surface. After making several passes with the coring machine over the area, seed the lawn. Then drag a section of chain link fence or rake over the area to obtain good seed to soil contact.

As new seedlings develop, continue mowing at the height intended for the entire area. It is important to mow the renovated lawn as frequently as needed to keep the existing old grass from shading the new seedlings.

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

Very small bare spots in lawns can be renovated without destroying existing grass.

Prepare the seedbed by broadcasting the seed on the soil surface, then cover the seed with about one-quarter inch of topsoil or sand.

Do not sow the grass seed too thick because it can encourage an environment more favorable for disease development. For more information, see

<https://publications.ca.uky.edu/files/agr51.pdf> or contact the Daviess County

Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or at annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

Annette's Tips:

The active ingredients in pesticides have changed over the years. Try cultural practices first to manage a pest. If a pesticide is needed, whether synthetically or organically derived, read the label before purchasing the product. Find the active ingredients that usually appear on the front of the label. Look for personal protective wear needed during pesticide application. The label is the law and must be followed.

Upcoming Event:

Applications for the Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Program Class are available at the office. The application deadline is July 25. Classes are scheduled for Thursday mornings from 9:00 a.m. to noon, starting September 4 through December 18. The registration fee is \$100.

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

The Martin-Gatton College of Agriculture, Food and Environment is an Equal Opportunity Organization with respect to education and employment and authorization to provide research, education information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without regard to economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, physical or mental disability or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity.