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August 20, 2022

Starting A New Lawn

Establishing a new lawn involves soil tillage and destruction of existing grass, unlike lawn renovation. However, the timing of mid-August to late September is the same. This time period provides less weed competition compared to the spring and favorable temperature and moisture conditions. An advantage to tilling the soil is the ability to improve it by incorporating organic matter. Tips for establishing a lawn are provided.

Turf-type tall fescue is the best grass for lawns in this area. It has few insect and disease problems, competes well with most weeds, has good traffic tolerance, establishes relatively easily, has a widespread fertility range, tolerates full sun, adapts to wet and droughty soils or clay and sandy soils, and is recommended for areas with shade. Fine fescue can be used in the shade if the turf-type fescue will not grow there; however, the leaf texture and plant habit are different from the turf-type fescue.

Although tall fescue is normally a bunchgrass, when sown at the proper rate, leaf coarseness or clumping is not a problem

Some cultivars of turf-type tall fescue with the best overall performance from University of Kentucky trials are Regenerate, Grade 3, Hemi, Bizem, Fesnova, Catalyst, Bullseye, Falcon IV, Falcon V, Terrano, and Firebird 2. These varieties are considered turf-type fescues and have

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a narrower leaf blade and better color than KY-31. If you are not able to find these varieties, any turf-type fescue is preferred because turf-type fescues are best for a lawn. KY-31 is better suited for very low-maintenance sites, utility turf areas, or pastures.

Mixtures of tall fescue with other types of grass are not recommended because coarse and fine textures mixed together make differences in blade widths noticeable. Under optimum conditions, the germination time for tall fescue is 7-10 days. However, it may take longer when moisture is lacking, when the surface soil temperature remains cold, or even when there are periods of wet/dry conditions. Germination also takes longer when old or poor-quality seed is used or when new seed harvested in the summer is used for a late summer seeding. This seed may have a short-term dormancy factor that slows down germination for several weeks.

Proper soil preparation is key to the success of establishing a fescue lawn. It is easier to amend the soil before the lawn is established.

Adding organic matter to the existing topsoil is the best way to improve it. Peat moss, well-decomposed sawdust, and well-rotted, weed-free manure and compost will improve soil that is too sandy, contains too much clay, or is compacted. Use 2 to 3 cubic yards of organic matter for every 1000 square feet of lawn. Spread it evenly over the surface and roto-till or disk it into the upper 6 inches of soil before seeding. Organic matter helps to improve water drainage and reduce compaction in clay soils. Do not work the soil when it is wet because the soil will compact more, thus losing the benefits of the organic matter.

Before planting, it is best to test the soil to determine the need for lime or fertilizer. Soil can be tested through your county Cooperative Extension Service Office. Generally, the tests are completed in 10 to 14 days. Testing the soil may save money and prevent problems in the future

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when certain nutrient or pH levels become too high. After applying the recommended amount of fertilizer and lime, work it into the top 4 to 6 inches of soil before seeding.

Allow the soil to settle in the newly worked area through two or three good rains or irrigations. If the water puddles, drain or fill in these low spots. Good surface drainage is a must! The final seedbed should be firm but not compacted and free of large clods and rocks.

Seeding the lawn can be accomplished with a rotary seeder or drop-type seeder and fertilizer spreader. Seeding rate for tall fescue is 6 pounds per 1000 square feet. For uniform distribution of the seed, divide the seed into two equal lots with the second lot seeded at right angles to the first. The seed should be covered by raking over it lightly or rolling, but avoid making a smooth surface.

The seeded area is covered with mulch such as straw that is as weed free as possible or other suitable material. The mulch should be spread thin enough to expose about 50 percent of the soil surface. It takes approximately one bale of straw per 1000 square feet of area. Water the newly seeded area frequently, especially if you do not use mulch. Keep the soil surface moist until the grass seedlings become established.

After the tall fescue grass seedlings begin to grow, mow at the recommended height of 2.5 to 3 inches. Sharpen the mower blade so the grass leaf blade is cut cleanly and not torn. By mowing early and not letting excessive grass accumulate, the texture will be finer, many upright weeds will be killed, and the turf will become denser.

For more information contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480, email at Annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu, or visit the UK website at <http://www.uky.edu/Ag/ukturf/lawns.html>.

Annette's Tip:

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When purchasing seed, look for the words “Certified Seed” in a block on the bag or on a tag attached to the bag. This guarantees that the information on the tag correctly reflects the contents of the bag and typically contains few weed seeds. More information is available in the publication “Lawn Establishment in KY”

(<http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/AGR/AGR50/AGR50.pdf>).

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