

Seed Lawns Now, Dormant Seeding Is Less Successful

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

There's an old saying that you can sow cool season grasses, including our common lawn grasses like tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass, any month of the year that has the letter "R" in it. While there is some truth in this, there are definitely some of those "R" months that are better than others!

September is THE month for planting a cool season grass lawn. The soil is still warm so grass seed germinates quickly. While it is starting to cool down, there is still enough hours of daylight and heat units that plants can become well established before they stop growing for winter. Naturally, there is an assumption here that we either receive adequate rain or you are watering the new seeding to encourage good growth.

Once we move into October the weather and the soil cools down fast. You can still plant grass seed and it will come up assuming the soil stays damp and we don't have too much early cold weather. The real problem is that the grass will sprout and start to get established but can't develop an adequate root system. Roots aren't just for providing water and nutrients from the soil to the plant. They also serve as an anchor for the plant.

As we move into November and then on in to the heart of winter, we annually expect a lot of freezing and thawing. This causes the soil to literally expand and contract. This movement will work small poorly developed grass seedlings right out of the soil. The plants don't freeze to death, they die of desiccation. The plants are slowly worked up out of the ground, the roots start to dry out and the plants die.

For this reason we recommend October 15th as a cut off date for fall planting. Most years we expect enough warm weather after mid October to get the grass well enough established to make it through the winter. In this case, straw mulch doesn't really seem to help. I'm actually not much of a fan of using mulch in new plantings due to issues with it not staying put because of the wind. I'm a believer that you just plan to water it regularly to keep it wet and get the seed sprouted and going. If we don't have regular showers in October, I would plan on watering the lawn to keep the plants growing as long as possible.

Once we get past early November you can attempt a dormant seeding. Dormant seeding is simply planting grass seed into ground that is too cold to allow sprouting. The seed overwinters in the ground and when the weather starts to warm in the spring, the seed sprouts and starts to grow. Dormant seeding can take place anytime through the late fall, winter and early spring when the ground isn't frozen. Again, it is imperative that the seed actually gets placed below the soil surface.

Once we hit early spring, the end of March, we move from dormant seeding into active seeding. Basically from about the last week of March on through the end of April is the spring seeding season. In the spring we want to get the seed planted fairly early so we can get a well developed grass plant in place before the heat of summer hits. Fescue and bluegrass can survive periods of summer heat and drought IF they have the chance to first develop a good crown and root system. So if you wanted to get some grass seed started this fall, get it done in the next few weeks, or wait for a dormant seeding, or next spring to arrive!