

A Good Lawn Starts With Selecting Good Grass Seed

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

In the coming weeks there will be a lot of grass seed planted in lawns as homeowners get to work on improving their lawn after the rough year we've been through. Some of these efforts will be highly successful while others will be of varying lesser successes. The biggest key to establishing or improving a lawn is to start with good quality grass seed.

Kansas is sort of stuck in the middle of "no man's land" when it comes to turfgrass species. We're too far north for the warm season southern grasses to thrive and too far south for the cool season northern grasses to thrive. Most of those species will survive, but they all have challenges. As we look at the needs in most yards we usually recommend either tall fescue or Kentucky bluegrass, but usually the tall fescue.

Cool season grasses need to be mowed about as tall as your lawn mower can mow - 2½ to 3 inches for bluegrass, 3 to 3½ inches for tall fescue. This is because these grasses have very upright leaves and we need to mow them tall to allow enough leaf area to support a healthy vigorous plant. Bluegrass is a true sod forming grass. It slowly creeps along underground via rhizomes to fill in thin spots. Tall fescue is a bunch grass. We simply plant it thick enough so the bunches are close enough together that it looks like a sod.

When you start selecting your grass seed you need to look at the fine print. By law, every bag of seed has to have a label telling what kind of seed is in the bag, how much of it, what's the purity, germination and state or country of origin. It will tell you how much inert material (chaff, bits of leaves or stems), weed seeds, and noxious weed seeds. As long as inert material isn't over 10% there isn't a problem. There will never be any noxious weed seeds as it's illegal to sell seed with noxious weed seeds. There may be a small percentage of weed seeds but I don't worry too much about that. What I do worry about is anything labeled crop or other crop. This is generally going to be other grass species and all too often is orchard grass. Even a few tenths of a % of crop seed is too much!

Most packages of grass seed will be a blend of several cultivars. Avoid those that have names like heavy traffic, sunny blend, basically anything that describes an environment. These will often be a majority of grass species that do not survive well in our climate. Avoid grass mixes that have very much ryegrass (perennial, annual or Italian), or creeping red fescue. Many of these grasses are included for quick germination and rapid establishment. They start out fast and fade equally fast when typical Kansas summer weather comes along. You want to find a blend that is all named tall fescue cultivars. K-31 is an old tall fescue cultivar that is still used especially in large seedings because it is cheaper. But it is very coarse bladed and is all too often contaminated with orchardgrass.

Some turfgrasses now have a coating that contains low amounts of fertilizer and water control components. That's fine but recognize that it can amount to 50% of the total weight of the package. Your 3 pound bag of seed may only actually only contain 1½ pounds of seed. This is important to make sure you apply the right amount of seed. Lastly, check and make sure that the seed is fresh. The label should tell you when the seed was tested and should include a "sell by" date as well. I've seen a lot of bags that are well past the sell by date still on shelves. All the pre and post planting preparation and care will be for naught if you plant poor quality grass seed!