

Getting a New Lawn Started Right

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

The best time to get a new tall fescue or bluegrass lawn started is September. At this time of year the soil is still warm but starting to cool. The grass seed will germinate relatively quickly, the warm days encourage good growth, the cool nights conserve soil moisture and avoid stressing the new plants. The goal is to plant it early enough in September so that we can get six good weeks of growth before cool weather starts to shut the plant down for the winter which usually occurs in November some time.

Grass seed needs to be placed IN the soil, not ON the soil. You can rent a powerseeder for overseeding thin lawns or after killing all the vegetation. Powerseeders have spinning vertical blades that cut slits in the soil and drop seed into those slits. Or you can rototill the area to be reseeded, scatter the grass seed and then rake it in. Once the seed is in the ground you can start watering it daily until it comes up or hope that Mother Nature helps out with regular rains. Just remember that once that seed starts to germinate, if it dries out, it's dead.

If you soil tested your yard apply the fertilizer as recommended from the soil test. If you didn't soil test, apply a starter fertilizer to make sure there is adequate phosphorus for the young plants. Low phosphorus levels is a common problem that results in grass plants germinating and establishing but then just sitting there not growing. Don't use any fertilizers with weed killers as they may damage the young grass plants. There will be weeds that come up also but we can deal with them later in the fall or next spring. The most important thing to do right now is get the grass seed in the ground and apply the starter fertilizer. That's it. Pretty simple. However, there are a couple of other considerations.

Good lawns start with good grass seed. Over decades of research we have found that for most conditions the only reliable cool season grass species are tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass. Plant one or the other, don't blend them. Tall fescue is going to be more shade tolerant but if you have heavy shade, no grass species is going to do well. Each package of grass seed has to have a label on it that says what is in it. If you start seeing things like ryegrass (annual or perennial) creeping red fescue or anything other than tall fescue or Kentucky bluegrass, avoid it. It may come up fast this fall and look good through next spring, but once we start to get blast furnace summer winds, it'll be in trouble.

Also look at other crop seeds. Most of the time other crop seeds means orchardgrass and you don't want that in your yard. Ideally I'd like to see 0.0% other crop seeds but as long as it is 0.1% or less you should be okay. Be aware that some mixes may have four to six named tall fescue cultivars and that's okay. These improved tall fescue varieties are exactly what you want. If you aren't sure, take a picture of the label and bring it in for me to look at or email it to me at cotte@ksu.edu. One last thing on seed: avoid mixes that use names like "Shady Area" or "High Traffic". You want tall fescue or Kentucky Bluegrass, not a cute name.

After choosing poor seed the other mistake made on new lawns is mowing. You want to mow that new lawn about three inches high. The clipping action of mowing encourages grass to tiller out more. Once it's over three inches tall start mowing. Do not set the mower low to clip it more often. You need those long leaf blades for the plant to be able to make food for growth. If you follow these few guidelines you should be able to have a pretty good looking lawn by winter!