

What Kind of Grass Seed Should I Plant

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

In last weeks column I alluded to the fact that you should be planting tall fescue or Kentucky bluegrass if you are planting a lawn in our region. But still I receive many questions about why not some other species of grass seed or maybe even buffalograss or something like that so we probably need to have a little bit deeper discussion of the different types of grass seed you are liable to encounter and which ones simply aren't well suited for northcentral Kansas.

Briefly about warm season grasses like zoysia, buffalograss and Bermuda grass. These species will work in our area but need full sunshine to survive. These are also planted in the mid to late spring time frame. Buffalograss starts well from seed but zoysia and Bermuda are often started from plugs, sod or sprigs. If you are interested in planting any of these, please give me a call at the Extension Office, 785-238-4161.

If you are planting grass seed this fall you need to be looking at cool season grasses. There are a lot of choices here including tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, and various "fine-leaved fescues" which include creeping red fescue, hard fescue, chewing's fescue, and sheep fescue. Whenever you are buying grass seed you will always find a label on the bag that tells you exactly what is in the bag of seed. Look at this closely as it tells you the species and variety in the bag as well as proportion of the mix, germination of each species and how much other crop seed (which includes grass species you don't want) and weed seed are in the bag. Most bags of grass seed will be a blend of several varieties and possibly different types.

The fine leaf fescues are, as their name implies, very fine leaved. They also have the most shade tolerance of about any of our grasses. The problem with them is that they are from much cooler climates than what we have in most of Kansas. They are not designed to take sun, high temperatures, hot winds, low humidity and low rainfall. If you plant a grass mix predominantly made up of these the lawn will start off looking good, but the first bit of hot dry weather and these grasses are going to be scorched and dying!

Perennial ryegrass can be very popular because it establishes faster than just about any other turfgrass and is really a nice looking turf. It germinates and makes a good lawn very quickly. It is often used for overseeding warm season lawns in the fall to extend the green season. It is less shade tolerant than tall fescue or the fine leaf fescues. But like the fine leaf fescues it is sensitive to heat and drought. It is more likely to survive periods of heat and drought than the fine leaf fescues but it is not a good choice for a southwest exposure with full sun and wind!

This leaves us with tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass. Both of these are the best suited to most of our conditions in Kansas. They will try to stay green through the summer but without adequate rainfall or irrigation they will go dormant in dry periods. But once it cools down and starts raining they will normally green back up quickly. Tall fescue is probably the best adapted especially if you plant a blend of several improved tall fescues which tend to have narrower leaf blades.

One last bit of advice on grass seed. Occasionally you will find seed mixes that include annual ryegrass, annual bluegrass or rough bluegrass. Avoid these like the plague! Obviously anything that is an annual is not good for a permanent lawn. They will die after going to seed. Rough bluegrass is aggressive and can become an unwanted weed in quality turf. Stick with seed mixes that are 100% named tall fescue or bluegrass cultivars and 0% other crop seeds!