

The ABC's of Seeding or Sodding a Lawn

Seeding or Sodding a Lawn

Late summer through fall is an ideal time to seed or sod a new lawn or repair an existing lawn. Warm days, cool nights, probable rainfall and less weed competition work with you, not against you! These conditions make it optimum to establish or reestablish a lawn that can develop adequately before the onset of colder winter weather.



Assessing the situation

First, decide if this is a complete renovation or a spot seed repair. Is 50% or more of your lawn damaged? If the answer is yes, a complete renovation is probably in order. Otherwise, spot seeding is recommended. Helpful hint: If you are new to gardening, a brown lawn due to lack of water, a result of natural drought and/or water restrictions will return to its green state once cooler weather and rainfall/irrigation resumes.

Ask yourself what led to the damaged lawn: Was it too much shade, a particular disease, or an insect/pest? Pinpointing the cause will help you choose improved varieties of grass seed that have desirable traits. These new types are better able to withstand certain cultural limitations. In addition, they are resistant to certain diseases and pests.

If chinch bugs, sod webworms, and armyworms were a problem, seek out a variety of grass seed that contains an **endophyte**, a naturally occurring beneficial fungus that wards off these particular insects. Why not have your natural armor on instead of going to battle with these pests! The presence of certain weeds may (not always) be an indication of a cultural condition that you may be able to change.

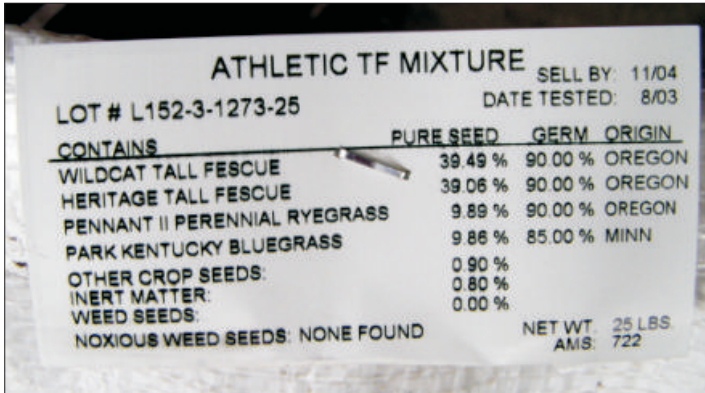
If you have this weed

you might have...

Knotweed	Compacted soils
Goosegrass	Compacted soils
Sorrel	Acid soil
Broadleaf plantain	Alkaline soil
Annual bluegrass	Poor drainage
Yarrow	Sandy/poor soil
Legume weeds	Nitrogen fertility is low

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CONTAINS	PURE SEED	GERM	ORIGIN
WILDCAT TALL FESCUE	39.49 %	90.00 %	OREGON
HERITAGE TALL FESCUE	39.06 %	90.00 %	OREGON
PENNANT II PERENNIAL RYEGRASS	9.89 %	90.00 %	OREGON
PARK KENTUCKY BLUEGRASS	9.86 %	85.00 %	MINN
OTHER CROP SEEDS:	0.90 %		
INERT MATTER:	0.80 %		
WEED SEEDS:	0.00 %		
NOXIOUS WEED SEEDS: NONE FOUND			

SELL BY: 11/04
DATE TESTED: 8/03
LOT # L152-3-1273-25
NET WT. 25 LBS
AMS. 722

Choosing the right grass seed

In most cases, the label on your grass seed has a good amount of information to help you choose what is right for your site. Use the descriptive name on the grass seed bag or box as a guideline for choosing seed. If it is labeled for "Shady Lawns," then it's probably not the one to use if you live in a new development with not a tree in site. If it has a name like "Family Play," it will probably do a good job handling your children's football game in the yard. Don't make your selection more complicated than it needs to be. For specifics, here is a guideline to grass species typically found on the garden center shelf.

Recommended for home lawns

Kentucky Bluegrass, *Poa pratensis*

- ❖ A staple in sod and high-end lawns.
- ❖ Has a rhizomatous growth habit and does best in full sun.
- ❖ Requires moderate to high levels of maintenance.
- ❖ Germination can take as long as 14 plus days.

Perennial Ryegrass, *Lolium perenne*

- ❖ Popular for its quick germination.
- ❖ Compatible with Kentucky Bluegrass.

- ❖ Has a clumping growth habit.
- ❖ Requires full sun but shade tolerant varieties exist.
- ❖ Look for varieties that also contain endophytes.
- ❖ Requires moderate maintenance.
- ❖ Germination takes 3-5 days.

Fine Fescue types

Different growth habits:

- ❖ Chewings Fescue lacks rhizomes.
- ❖ Creeping Red Fescue has some rhizomes.
- ❖ Spreading Fescue has rhizomes and relatively thicker leaf blades.
- ❖ Hard fescue has a clumping growth habit.
- ❖ Generally better suited to shady situations than Kentucky Bluegrass or Perennial Ryegrass.
- ❖ Does best in full sun.
- ❖ Avoid excessive watering.
- ❖ Require low to moderate maintenance.

Tall Fescue, *Festuca arundinaceae*

- ❖ Has a bunching growth habit.
- ❖ Does best in full sun.
- ❖ Some varieties contain endophytes.
- ❖ Requires low maintenance.
- ❖ Great for high traffic areas--that's why athletic fields benefit from this species.

Rough Bluegrass, *Poa trivialis*

- ❖ Not as well known, but has its place.
- ❖ Best suited to shady, wet sites.
- ❖ Has a stoloniferous growth habit.
- ❖ Requires low maintenance.

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Not recommended for home lawns

Creeping Bentgrass, *Agrostis palustris*

- ❖ Best for golf course greens, tennis courts, and bowling greens.
- ❖ Has a stoloniferous growth habit.
- ❖ Best mowed at very short heights as evidenced on the golf course.
- ❖ In a home lawn situation it becomes “puffy” and when raked, you can pull up large patches.
- ❖ High maintenance grasses.

Annual (Italian) Ryegrass, *Lolium multiflorum*

- ❖ Quick green up.
- ❖ Has medium to coarse texture.
- ❖ Only lasts one growing season.

Annual Bluegrass, *Poa annua*

- ❖ Considered a weed and should be avoided.

A word on Zoysia

Zoysia japonica is a warm season grass. It is typically found in southern environs but will grow and overwinter in the north. It thrives on heat, so it does great in the summer. Fertilizer requirements are low to moderate, and its overall color is a lighter green. With the first frost, it browns and takes longer to green up in spring than the other cool season species of grasses previously mentioned. If you insist on using this species, it is best to plant by plugs.

Zoysia is a stoloniferous grass, so power raking this species is not recommended. Depending on how close you plant the plugs will dictate how long it will take before you have an exclusively zoysia lawn.

Conversely, if you are trying to eliminate a zoysia lawn, a non-selective weed killer is the only way to go.

Grass mixtures and blends

Whichever grasses you choose, blends and mixtures are recommended over **monoculture** type plantings. Blends are a combination of several varieties of one species.

Mixtures are a combination of several species. Check with your local Cooperative Extension Service or garden center for specific grass seed varieties suitable for your area.



Grass seed mixture ready for the spreader

Soil types

First, assess your soil type. Soils are made up of sand, silt, and clay particles. The largest particles are sand, the smallest are clay. To help distinguish what type of soil you have, try this simple home exercise:

1. Get an old jar, with ample room, add a cup of soil, a squeeze of dishwashing liquid, and fill with water to the top.
2. Seal the jar with the cap, shake vigorously and then let sit undisturbed overnight.
3. Upon examination, from the bottom to the top, you should see three distinct layers of sand, silt, and clay bottom. You can assign a percentage to them based by the thickness of each layer.

Sandy soils are made of large particles--think of your last visit to the beach. You can clearly see the individual grains of sand. They drain well and don't hold water or fertilizer for long, thus gardens with

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sandy soils must be watered and fertilized more frequently than others.

Clay soils are made of the smallest particles. Water is tightly held and drainage is typically poor.

Conversely, they can be more fertile. Incorporating organic matter can always improve your soil no matter what your soil type.

Organic matter

Organic matter incorporated into sandy soils helps improve water holding capacity and fertility. Added to clay soils, organic matter helps to aerate and improve drainage. Suitable types of organic matter are compost, peat moss, and aged manures. Prices and availability will vary. In many municipalities compost may be free for the asking; check with local government offices.

pH

Have your soil tested for pH--the measure of your soil's acidity or alkalinity. Grasses grow best in slightly acid soils with a pH between 6.2-6.8. Soil can be easily tested at your local Cooperative Extension office (check the blue government pages in your phone book) or at better garden centers.

If your pH is lower than the recommended, ground limestone (lime) will be needed to raise the pH. The amount needed depends on both the test results and the type of soil on your property. Lime is best incorporated into the soil prior to planting so it is in the plant's root zone where it will be most effective. Granulated limestone or pelletized limestone is recommended. Avoid hydrated lime, as it can be caustic in garden situations.

If your pH is higher than recommended, elemental sulfur should be incorporated to lower the pH. How much to apply will depend on your soil type and pH test results.

Preparing for a complete renovation

Use a non-selective vegetation killer with an active ingredient of glyphosate. Read the label first and always apply according to label directions. Helpful hint: Never apply on a windy day that could cause material to drift onto desirable plants. When all vegetation is dead (7-14 days depending on weather and site conditions) rototill and rough grade the area removing all debris and rocks.



Rototill first to prepare the area for seed or sod

Apply the recommended amount of lime, and then incorporate organic matter (2" deep layer of peat moss, compost or well-rotted manure) and fertilizer. These three steps are best done by applying the lime and the fertilizer with a spreader and depositing the organic matter over the entire site. Then rototill all materials in to a depth of six to eight inches. Use a bow or iron rake to level the site, remove additional rocks and debris. Your site is now ready for seed or sod.

Proper soil preparation is key! Seize the opportunity to make some major improvements in this area and you will be rewarded for your efforts.

Seeding a new lawn

Use the seed box/bag directions as your guide. Set your spreader at the recommended setting found on the seed box or bag. Here's a helpful hint to applying seed: If the box recommends 3 lbs per 1000sq/ft, you will get better coverage if you make two applications of 1.5 lbs per 1000 sq/ft made in opposite directions. That means for your first application you will walk the

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spreader in a north and south direction, your second application will be in an east and west direction. This assures complete coverage, as you are less likely to have strips or areas that your spreader missed. It is important to have good seed to soil contact.



Tools to get the job done: spreader, rake and roller.

Next, gently rake the area to cover the seed and lightly roll the area to achieve good soil to seed contact. (Rolling is optional; seed will germinate slower if this step is eliminated.)

Water is critical for seed germination! Irrigate as needed; never allow the soil to dry out. Seeding in late summer through mid-fall generally affords cool nights that keep grass seed from drying out and allow it to establish without the affects of intense summer heat.

Once your grass has reached a height of three inches, it is time to mow.

Don't forget to mow--this actually prunes and forces each individual grass plant, no matter what their growth habit, to get bushier and fill in the soil gaps between each plant. Don't mow



Make sure you water after seeding to moisten soil

when the ground is wet, as in this new planting, you may cause mower ruts, which will have to be fixed. Continue watering and mowing as needed and resume your fertilizer regimen at Thanksgiving.

For those thrifty gardeners who want to use last year's seed: If you have stored it in a cool dry place, you can use the seed at 1.5x the recommended rate. So if the label recommends seeding at 4lbs per 1000 sq/ft, use 6 lbs per 1000 sq/ft.

Sod instant gratification

First and foremost--buy fresh sod! Many garden centers keep a fresh supply of sod on hand, especially during the weekends. Whether you have the sod delivered or pick it up yourself, keep it in the shade until you are ready to install it, preferably the same day. If shade is not available, cover it with a tarp to keep the sun off of it. Sod is perishable--sun or heat will cause it to deteriorate rapidly!

- ❖ Once the soil is prepared, water the site the night before you intend on laying the sod. You don't want to apply sod to a dry soil; the roots will find that to be a very inhospitable environment.
- ❖ Lay the strips of sod in a "brick layers" pattern so all seams are not in the same place.
- ❖ Once completely laid, tamp or roll. Avoid air pockets under the sod.



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- ❖ Irrigate as needed until the sod “knits”. That means, the roots have grown into the soil and if you try and pull it up, it doesn't come up like a rug. This could mean watering daily or several times a day if temperatures are high. You don't want to over water, as root rot can set in and your efforts will be for naught. When in doubt, get on your hands and knees and take a look to actually examine and feel the soil.
- ❖ Mow at three inches, removing no more than one inch as needed. Failure to mow will result in inferior establishment. Keep the mower blade sharp!
- ❖ Once established, sod lawns can resume a lawn care program (weed, fungus, and pest control and fertilizer applications)

Spot renovations

Following all the steps as outlined above, prepare the areas for seeding or sodding as best you can by removing the dead affected areas. It's best to mix organic matter and soil and fill-in the bare areas. Do not use peat moss as an exclusive seed base as it has no fertilizer value. When peat moss dries out, it gets crusty and repels water, thereby depriving your seeds of the very water they need!

Retail patch kits

Now most garden centers carry a bagged seed and green colored mulch combination that can be applied to the lawn for filling in bare spots. The advantage is that the mulch does retain water and germination is successful as a result. Though convenient, this can be expensive. Soil preparation prior to application is still very necessary and cannot be skipped. Be sure the grass seed varieties are suitable for your site.

After the work is done...

As your lawn goes into fall, you may see less leaf growth, but the grass plants are still hard at work. The roots will continue to grow deeper, stolons or rhizomes will continue to spread, and plants will tiller to establish the lawn you have been dreaming of. Continued mowing is critical for this to happen. Mow until the grass goes dormant. The thicker and denser you can get your lawn now, the less likely you will have weed problems next spring.

Glossary

Endophyte: a naturally-occurring beneficial fungus that wards off particular insects.

Monoculture: the planting of a single species of plant in large quantities in a given location.

Shopping List/Notes

About Your Expert

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Donna  the Garden

PlantAmerica Horticulturist Donna Moramarco (a.k.a. “Donna in the Garden”) has been helping gardeners solve problems and achieve their dreams for over two decades. Donna has degrees in horticulture and education plus over 20 years as a Cornell University extension horticulturist.