

Make Preparations Now For Lawn Seeding

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

There's an old adage that you can plant fescue or bluegrass any month that has an R in it. There's actually a lot of truth in that, but in general, we feel that September is far and away the best month to plant new lawns. We definitely want to get lawns planted by early/mid October but in general we prefer to see that new seed go in the ground the first half of September.

In early September the soil is still quite warm which means that grass seed, as long as it rains or is irrigated, will germinate quickly and optimize the chances of getting the grass plants well established before fall and winter weather sets in and stops growth until spring. But you just can't go out there the first of September, throw some grass seed around and expect to have a good result!

The two biggest reasons why grass seed plantings fail, are improper seeding and low soil phosphorus levels. Many of our yards have low phosphorus levels, especially if it is a fairly new development. If the soil phosphorus levels are low, the new grass will germinate, start to grow and then just sit there! It's fairly easy to find out if you need to add phosphorus. Go to 6 or 8 spots around your yard and with a trowel pull a soil sample from the top 3 to 4 inches. Put all of these samples together in a bucket, mix them together and then pull out a one pint sample from this conglomerate. Bring this into our office (119 East 9th Street, Junction City) and we'll send it to the K-State soils lab for analysis. Tall fescue has a fairly broad range of soil pH tolerance so we rarely have to add lime or sulfur to adjust the pH.

The other big mistake that homeowners make is that they don't get the grass seed properly planted. Quite bluntly, if you think you're just going to go out and toss some seed on the surface and water and it will grow, you're going to be disappointed! Grass seed needs to be UNDER the soil surface. It doesn't have to be buried, but it needs to be about one fourth to one half inch deep. You can till the soil up, smooth it out, broadcast the seed and then rake or harrow it in. That does work fairly well. But I find that renting a power seeder from a hardware store, garden center or rental store is much easier. If you are overseeding, this works very well as it slices the soil and drops the seed into the slice.

If you are renovating a lawn that is full of Bermudagrass, then the month of August is very important. You can not kill Bermudagrass by tilling it, you have to use herbicides to kill it. Make sure that the Bermudagrass is growing well and then spray it with glyphosate. About ten days after spraying, water it well, if it hasn't rained, and then spray it again a couple days after watering. Then a week after that mow it as low as you can to get as much of that dead vegetation removed as possible. If you don't have a thick thatch layer left, you can use a power seeder to plant right into the dead grass. If you have a lot of thatch, you'll probably need to have it tilled up and leveled before planting.

The final key to getting a new lawn well established is to keep it well watered after planting. If it rains regularly, that's great, but keep in mind that once the seed starts to swell and germinate, it must stay moist until well rooted or the seed/plant will die. If irrigation is necessary, water enough to soak the top inch of soil once to twice a day depending on how fast it dries out.

September 1st is the kickoff date for the lawn planting season. But if you wait until then to start the process, you'll already be behind the pack. Start now with all the preparation so you're ready to plant on September 1!