

Get Ready for Lawn Seeding

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

“The best time to plant lawn grasses is any month that has a letter R in it.” While there is a fair amount of truth in that old saying, let me take it a step further. If you want to either plant a new lawn or overseed an existing lawn to thicken it up, September is THE month to do that. Many years you will probably have to water it at least a little to get it out of the ground and well started, but it will be worth the water bill to get a lawn off to a good start.

We are mainly looking at tall fescue or Kentucky bluegrass when we talk about preferred lawn grasses in northern Kansas. Perennial ryegrass doesn't have near the drought tolerance and the fine leaf fescues like creeping red fescue don't have the heat and drought tolerance to survive for very long. Improved tall fescue or Kentucky bluegrass are your best choices. These grasses grow best in the cooler weather of spring and fall. Planting in early September we have warm soils that will germinate the grass about as quickly as possible, assuming there is soil moisture and we then have six to eight weeks of good growing conditions so the plant can get a good crown developed and well rooted. Winter damage to new lawn seeding isn't so much from freezing out, but from poorly rooted plants being frost heaved out of the ground!

Right now you should be focusing on three things if you are going to plant grass seed. First of all start getting the area prepared. If you are completely starting over you may want to spray the area with glyphosate to kill all existing vegetation. You can till the ground up so you have a nice smooth soil surface or you can use a power seeder to just plant into the existing dead vegetation. I've used power seeders on several occasions for both new seeding and for overseeding areas and they work very well. You may also want to reserve any rental equipment that you may want to use, like a tiller or power seeder ahead of time to make sure you have it when you need it.

Secondly you should take a soil sample and bring it to the office so we can check the soil pH and phosphorus levels to make sure we have what we need for good growth. If we need to lime the soil to raise the pH or have low phosphorus levels, then these are both conditions that are easily corrected before planting by applying lime and/or fertilizer and then tilling these into the soil. After the lawn is planted, we have very limited options.

Finally, secure your seed. If you are planting a new stand of tall fescue you will need 6 to 8 pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet. If you are overseeding you'll just need 3 to 4 pounds per 1,000 square feet. For Kentucky bluegrass a new seeding will require 2 to 3 pounds per 1,000 square feet, overseeding will require 1 to 1.5 pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet.

You are best off to try to buy blends of pure improved tall fescue or Kentucky bluegrass. Avoid grass blends with names like shady or sunny, etc. Check the label on the bag of grass seed. By law every bag has to have a label that tells you how much of what named varieties of grass seed is in the bag. If you are seeing high percentages of perennial ryegrass or creeping red fescue, keep looking. Also look closely at the label for “Other Crop Seed”. There is a grass species called orchardgrass that is often found as a contaminant in lawn seed mixtures. It will be included as other crop seed and you don't want it in your lawn. Other crop seed should be as close to 0% as possible!

Taking a little time to prepare for new lawn seeding now will go a long ways towards helping you get a new lawn off to a successful start in September!