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Seeding/Reseeding Fescue Lawns

Seeding fescue involves more than scattering some pasture grade fescue, such as Kentucky 31, by hand during the halftime of your favorite football game. Success depends on a little more planning and, unfortunately, considerably more effort.

Background

Fescue is a cool season grass. It thrives in spring and fall, stays green in winter and struggles to survive the summers in the Tulsa area. Kentucky bluegrass is another cool season grass generally even less heat tolerant, but which may be useful planted as a mixture with fescue

Tulsa is in a transition zone between ideal climate for warm season grasses south of us and best conditions for cool season turf to the north. Fescue would rather live in Iowa than Oklahoma.

Fescue will germinate when the soil temperature is in the 70 degree range in both spring and fall. However, spring planted fescue cannot establish enough roots by summer and usually dies. The ideal time to sow fescue or bluegrass is the last half of September through the first half of October. Fall planted fescue will have a deep root system better able to cope with the heat by the following summer.

The Steps Involved

Although the process is a little different whether you are seeding a new lawn or reseeding an old one, the following steps are suggested:

1. For existing lawns, identify and correct factors causing poor performance
2. If possible, have results of a soil test at the time of planting
3. Make a decision as to what type of seed you wish to plant, purchase beforehand
4. Buy a "starter" fertilizer, best based on soil test results, use only nutrients needed
5. Remove undesirable grasses and weeds
6. Loosen the soil, adding fertilizer and organic material as needed
7. Sow the proper amount of seed to get good coverage
8. Bare ground or slope may benefit from a very loose straw mulch
9. Irrigate to keep top of soil constantly moist until seedlings are 2 inches tall
10. Irrigate less often and more deeply at 2 inches to establish deep roots
11. Mow when 3 inches, with a sharp bladed mower
12. If needed, control broadleaved weeds with a 2,4-D type herbicide after 3rd mowing

Identify the original problem

If you lost some of your fescue, there is a reason. Try to identify and correct the problem before reseeding; otherwise you will lose your new grass to an old problem.

Common problems include compacted or infertile soil, too much or too little water, weed overgrowth, fungal disease, or too dense shade. Another factor contributing to fescue decline is poor initial establishment with a shallow root system due to improper watering.

Most of these problems have solutions. A soil test will identify a need for specific nutrients or for pH (degree of acidity) adjustments. Compacted soils can be improved by tilling composted organic material into the upper few inches. This is beneficial to most soils.

Watering fescue in Oklahoma is a must. However, if Irrigation is used improperly, it may contribute to fescue decline. Watering any turf frequently and superficially is a common mistake. Shallow watering promotes a shallow root system which is susceptible to heat stress and disease. Also, lawns should be watered in the mornings. Wet grass at night is much more likely to get diseases.

A fungal disease, "brown patch", is a very common cause of fescue decline. It develops in the heat of summer and may rapidly kill large portions of lawns. Fungicides available to homeowners are not helpful. Improper fertilization and irrigation promote the disease.

Fescue should be fertilized only in March, September and November. Fescue goes partially dormant in summer to cope with the heat. If it is fertilized in summer, dormancy is prevented and the chance of brown patch is greatly increased.

Another common cause of poor fescue performance is lack of sun. Fescue tolerates shade better than any of our turfgrasses, but it performs best in sun. If your shade is too dense, such as under a tree with dense canopy, start thinking shade tolerant groundcover, not turf.

What seed should you plant?

The selection of seed is important. This is a situation where the adage "you get what you pay for" applies. Make sure the seed has been shown to have at least an 85% germination rate within the past year. The test results should also state that there are no noxious weed seeds. This information is found on the label. Plant turf-type tall fescue, not pasture fescue.

The turfgrass division of OSU continuously screens new fescues for appearance and performance. Among the top 50 cultivars studied, there is no one best type. All are acceptable. It has been shown that a blend of 3 or more of these varieties performs much better than a single type. Blends seem to allow the strengths of some to overcome the weaknesses of others.

OSU researches also feel that a blend of fescues, mixed with Kentucky bluegrass, performs well. Fescue and bluegrass each have certain diseases to which they are susceptible. However, combining the grasses seems to reduce or mask each other's diseases. Bluegrass also has the capacity to spread, filling in bare spots; fescue does not spread significantly.

Therefore, either a blend of 3 or more fescues alone or a mixture of a fescue blend with Kentucky bluegrass would be good choices for seed.

Preparing the soil

Before entertaining thoughts of planting, it is desirable to have soil test results in hand. Also, do a rough calculation of the area to be seeded. Most of the rates of seed and fertilizer recommended are quoted as pounds applied per 1000 sq. ft.

Weeds must be eliminated by hand or using herbicide. Bermuda is too aggressive for fescue and should be killed completely with glyphosate, the herbicide in Roundup. It usually needs 2-4 sprayings at 1-2 week intervals for complete removal. Fescue may be seeded one week after the last glyphosate has been sprayed.

Soils normally develop a crust and this must be tilled to make soil receptive to seed. The soil may be loosened with a rake and elbow grease, or by machine. If you have a large area to seed, especially if most of the old grass is gone, consider a rototiller or a machine called a verticutter (power rakes and slit-seeders are variations of the same machine)

These machines may be rented. They are lawnmower sized, heavy and require moderate physical effort. However, they do an excellent job of preparing the seed bed. A rototiller can loosen soil several inches deep, a verticutter usually tills to one inch or less.

At the time of soil preparation, till in necessary amendments as indicated by the soil test. A "starter" fertilizer can be added then, especially if the soil test indicates a need for phosphorus or potassium. These nutrients do not move in the soil and to be available to the plant, they should be tilled into the root zone. Try not to use these nutrients, especially phosphorus, unless there is a need. Most of our lawns have large phosphorus excesses and adding more amounts to pollution.

All lawn soils benefit from added organic material, such as compost. It improves drainage, air flow and adds nutrients. Till in a generous amount at the time of soil preparation.

Seeding and after care

Sow seeds evenly with either a drop or rotary spreader. . For best coverage, apply in a criss-cross pattern; applying half in a North-South direction and the second half East-West.

When reseeding an established lawn, use 3-6 lbs of seed per 1000 sq. ft. For new lawns use a 6-8 lbs. rate. Don't take the "more is better" approach. If the seed is too thick, it will look good at germination, but it is likely to die due to competition with itself and disease.

After seeding, good seed to soil contact is needed. Use the backside of a rake to mix seed into the top ¼ inch of soil, then use a roller (may be rented cheaply), your feet or something you improvise, to press the seed into the soil. A temporary mulch, such as wheat straw may be useful to protect the seeds and keep them moist.

The seed and the upper inch of the soil must be kept moist during the first 2-3 weeks. This may mean watering briefly 2 times daily, more often if it is warm and windy. After the seedlings are 2 inches tall, begin to water less frequently and more deeply. The goal is to moisten the soil to a 6 inch depth twice weekly, depending on the weather. After arrival of cool weather, water only as needed. Infrequent deep watering encourages long roots to develop.

Three or four weeks after seeding, add a fertilizer containing only nitrogen. Apply 1 lb. of nitrogen per 1000 sq. ft. Repeat this one month later and do not fertilize again until the following March.

Begin mowing when the grass is at 3 inches, using a sharp bladed mower. The grass should be kept at 2.5-3 inches and no more than 1/3rd height removed at each mowing. Leave fescue at 3 inches for winter.

If broad-leaf weeds are a problem, one of the weed killer combinations with 2,4-D may be safely used after the third mowing.

Refer to OSU fact sheet 6419, "Establishing a Lawn in Oklahoma" for more information. Also the OSU reference sheet "Tall Fescue Home Lawn Care" is a condensed and invaluable source of information.