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Time to Get Your Lawn Back in Shape

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Late summer through early fall is the optimum time for lawn renovation, construction or just reseeding bare spots. A number of factors can contribute to the decline of lawns including compaction, poor drainage, shade, acidity and low fertility, sandy soils with low water holding capacity, insects, and disease problems. Try to figure out what factors caused the lawn to deteriorate. Efforts made to correct the underlying problems will improve turf growth and establishment. Sometimes nothing can be done to rectify the situation and other alternatives to lawn may have to be considered.

Whether you are reseeding small areas or renovating entire sections of the yard, it should be as weed free as possible. It is too late to use an herbicide to kill weeds for overseeding purposes at this time so either hand weed or use a rake to remove unwanted vegetation. Also if your soil is low in organic matter, now would be a good time to incorporate some peat moss or leaf compost or other organic material. This will help increase the amount of water and nutrients the soil can hold.

Crabgrass has been a major problem in some yards. The droughty conditions of the past few summers have left bare spots which are a perfect place for crabgrass to germinate. It is an annual grass which will be killed by the frost but unfortunately it leaves behind thousands of seeds. In smaller areas, do your best to rake up the plants and their seed heads before reseeding. The best way to control crabgrass is not to give it any bare spots in which to germinate.

Grass seeds need to come into contact with bare mineral soil for germinating roots to establish so use a garden rake to loosen the top quarter inch of soil. Most soils will benefit from the addition of limestone and fertilizer before planting. Without a soil test, apply approximately 50 pounds of limestone per 1000 square feet along with 20 pounds of a 5-10-10 fertilizer.

Many are aware of the recent phosphorus legislation which says that it is illegal to apply phosphorus fertilizers to an established lawn unless a soil test, taken in the last 2 years, recommends the addition of phosphorus. However, it is perfectly legal and recommended that a small amount of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium be added to the soil before seeding or reseeding. Plant roots need these nutrients to get established.

The kind of seed that will be purchased depends in part on the type of use the area will receive as well as site conditions. It is often a good idea to use a mixture of grass species. That way if a disease or insect problem strikes, the whole lawn may not be affected.

For most well-drained, sunny areas use a mixture of 60 to 70 percent Kentucky bluegrass, 20 to 30 percent fine-leaved fescues and 10 percent ryegrass. It would be advantageous to purchase blends that have not only different species of turf grasses but also various cultivars of each species.

In areas with little irrigation or other inputs, University of Connecticut turf professor Steven Rackliffe recommends mixes with a high percentage of fine-leaved fescues. Shady areas are also best planted in fine-leaved fescues. Do consider the amount of shade present. Realistically no turf grass will succeed with less than 4 hours of direct sun each

day. Plants just cannot photosynthesize enough to keep themselves alive. In heavily shaded areas consider shade-tolerant groundcovers or simply mulch the area.

In recent years, turf type tall fescues have been developed that are endophytically enhanced. An endophyte is a fungal organism that infects the roots of a plant. In this case it is beneficial making the turf plants more drought tolerant, disease resistant and less palatable to insects like the chinch bug and sod webworm. They are believed to produce chemicals called alkaloids which are toxic to certain turf-eating insects. These chemicals may also cause problems when consumed by grazing animals so use them on home lawns, not in pastures. There are also tall type fescue seeds available without the fungus.

In general 1 to 2 pounds of grass seed per 1000 square feet is used for overseeding and 3 to 4 pounds per 1000 square feet for new lawn establishment but read the instructions on the package to determine the rate necessary. After scratching up the surface, scatter the seed and water enough to keep the seedbed moist. Newly seeded areas can be lightly covered with straw or a light coating of compost to help hold in moisture needed for seed germination.

Ryegrasses generally germinate in 7 days, fescues in 10 to 14 days while bluegrass needs about 3 weeks to germinate. Because of the longer germination time for Kentucky bluegrass, Rackliffe suggests seeding any Kentucky bluegrass lawns as soon as possible. You still have a couple more weeks to plant ryegrasses and fescues. Depending on the weather, new seedings may need to be lightly sprinkled every day or so. The key is not to let the seeds dry out.

Once the grass gets 2 ½ to 3 inches high, any straw can be gently raked up and the grass can be cut to about 2 inches in height. Keep watering when necessary and mowing until growth stops.

Take advantage of this opportune time to get your lawn back into shape. It may take 2 or 3 seasons for your lawn to fully recover if there was a lot of damage due to drought and other stresses so now is a great time to get it on the road to recovery.

If you have questions about lawns or on other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.