

Seeding Cool-Season Grasses

Cool-season grasses—bluegrass, fescue and ryegrass—are best seeded in early September. Seeds germinate and grow rapidly in the warm soil and fall seeded lawns have an opportunity to establish, with little competition from weeds, before the freeze of winter. Early October seeding can be successful if fall temperatures remain mild and weed competition remains low. October 15th is generally considered the last day for planting a lawn in the fall.

Before seeding your lawn, take a soil test to determine if any of the essential nutrients are deficient or the soil pH is too high or too low. Take 10 to 12 random samples of your soil, 3 inches-4 inches deep. Combine all the samples removing debris as you mix them. From this composite sample, take out 1 pint of soil and bring it to your local Extension Office, this should be enough to fill up a sandwich bag. Your sample will be sent to K-State for analysis and recommendations will be sent to you within a few weeks. If soil amendments are recommended from your test, incorporate them into the soil *before* planting at rates established by the soil test.

Preparing the seedbed is the most important step in establishing a healthy lawn. A properly prepared seedbed is essential for the establishment of a healthy, vigorous lawn. Chemicals, fertilizers, watering and reseeding will not make up for poor soil preparation so don't skip this step!

Soil preparation is the same for seed, sod, plugs or sprigs. At least 4 to 6 inches of nutrient-rich, properly aerated soil is needed to grow a healthy lawn. 10 to 12 inches of soil in this condition is preferred. Soils with a high clay or silt content become easily compacted, while sandy soils require frequent watering and fertilizing so pay attention to your soil type when you take your sample. The properties of soil types can be improved through the addition of weed-free organic matter such as peat moss, compost or well-rotted or dehydrated manure.

The soil bed should be prepared several weeks before it is time to plant. Sometimes soil conditions and/or equipment limitations make it difficult to till 10 to 12 inches deep. In these cases, till as deeply as possible—the deeper the better. Use a plow, disc, rototiller or other suitable equipment. After tilling and incorporating nutrients, allow soil to settle for a couple of days. Then do a final grading to smooth out the soil surface. If adequate power equipment is unavailable to prepare and improve the soil, hiring a professional service or renting the equipment is an option. Avoid over-tilling the soil, as it will destroy soil structure.

Late plantings that fail are usually not killed by cold temperatures but rather desiccation. The freezing and thawing of soils heave poorly rooted grass plants out of the ground, where they then dry out and die. Keep plants well watered to help maximize root growth before freezing weather arrives.

When overseeding an existing lawn, start by mowing the lawn short (1-1½ inches) to help move seeds down through the canopy to the soil. Soil contact and light (more abundant with grass mowed short) increases the plant's ability to germinate and grow.

To improve seed to soil contact, consider using a power rake or core aerator. Seeder-slicer units are also available to cut through thatch and sow seed at the same time. When overseeding; seed selection, sowing, watering and fertilization principles are the same as for new plantings. However, the seeding rate should be cut in half to account for existing turf. Too much new seed can create competition and weaken the lawn. If only a few spots need to be reseeded, prepare those areas with a hand rake then sow the seed as uniformly as possible by hand. Spread a thin layer of soil over the seed or work it in with the rake.

Another option is dormant seeding during the winter. The seed does not immediately germinate. In the spring, when soils warm, seed will germinate. Begin dormant seeding when soil temperatures average less than 40°F, normally mid to late November. This method will result in some loss of seed (depending on soil temperatures) and new plants will need to be closely monitored and regularly irrigated.