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Turf Tips: How Can I Plant a Lawn?

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Should I overseed my lawn or start all over again?

You are the best judge of that, but use these guidelines to make your decision. If you look at a section of your lawn, and you are satisfied with its appearance, than consider overseeding at the proper time (see the table) to help maintain your lawn in its current good condition.

However if you look at the turf in your lawn and it seems to be 30%-50% weeds and/or bare spots you might consider totally renovating that section of lawn. Remember that good turf coverage is not only pretty but it enhances the value of your home, helps to prevent certain insect infestations (such as fire ants and ground bees), and helps prevent erosion from sending your soil to sediment in surface waters.

I decided to overseed. What should I do?

Many of the directions for overseeding are identical to those for starting a lawn from scratch, so read the rest of this sheet for more information. Overseeding requires less seed and much less soil preparation. Select seed that matches the turf you already have, and measure the area to be overseeded. When it is time to overseed (see the table), mow your lawn very short so the seed can make contact with the soil when you spread it. Consider either core aerating or using a slit seeder from an equipment rental company to rough up the soil to receive the seed. Then spread the seed according to the seeding rates found in the table. After seeding, you must keep the seed moist until the grass plants are well established.

This may take two weeks or more depending on the seed and the air temperature. You can mulch the area with one to two bales of salt hay, or clean straw per thousand square feet to help with moisture retention, but you will still have to water the area briefly 1-3 times per day.

I need to start my lawn from scratch.

Where do I begin?

The most important part of starting a new or renovated turf area is soil preparation. Ask your Virginia Cooperative Extension Agent to help you get a soil test. The test is inexpensive (\$7.00 at the time of this writing) and will give you important recommendations for addition of lime and soil nutrients. While you wait for the soil test results, you can begin to remove other grass or plants from the area to be planted. You can till the area, and then re-till it to kill germinating weed seeds, or you could get an herbicide recommendation from your Extension Agent. Be careful not to use a pre-emergent herbicide, or one with long-lasting effects so it won't interfere with your planting later.

What type of grass should I grow?

This is a matter of personal preference, but we can offer some guidance. In Virginia, both warm and cool-season grasses can be successfully planted. Warm season grasses such as Bermudagrass, Centipedegrass, Zoysiagrass, and others grow best during the warmer months, go dormant and turn a khaki color during winter, but may remain green

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during the warm, summer, droughty, months. Not all warm season grasses are able to survive winter cold, so be sure that the variety you select can survive in your area. Cool season grasses such as Bentgrass, Tall Fescue, perennial Ryegrass, and Bluegrass, grow best during the cooler seasons of the year, and are very cold hardy, but may go dormant during the hottest part of the summer. If you live in the western parts of Virginia, you may find that warm-season grasses won't survive the harsh winters. If you live in the Tidewater area, you may find that the warm-season grasses are the most desirable.

Different grasses have different colors, textures, and growth requirements. It is best if you can see some different types of grass turf. Call you Extension Agent, and ask if there any turf plots near you that you could see to help you select a turf type AND ask for help in selecting a suitable grass for your turf. VA Tech has a web page³ that gives the best varieties of each type of grass grown in Virginia. You can go to this site or ask your Extension Agent for help in selecting a cultivar of the grass you select for your turf. You might have trouble selecting a cultivar from the list and setting out to buy it. Instead decide what kind of grass to buy, and shop with the list of approved cultivars by your side. That way you can select cultivars that are likely to succeed in Virginia.

How can I prepare the soil?

When you get the results of your soil test, you can add the recommended amounts of lime and fertilizer and till these into your soil. Remove large stones and other debris, and level the area to be planted. It is also a good idea to add compost to your soil at this time. To ensure a smooth surface, avoid walking on the prepared area as much as possible until the grass is established.

³ <http://sudan.cses.vt.edu/html/Turf/varietyr.htm>
or ask your Virginia Cooperative Extension Agent to get you a copy of "VIRGINIA TURFGRASS VARIETY RECOMMENDATIONS."

How do I plant the lawn?

You have several options depending on the type of grass you plan to grow.

Sodding - Many grasses are available as sod. Sodding a lawn results in a thick and instant stand of turf, but it can be expensive. The amount of sod you need is determined by the square footage of the area to be planted. You can buy the sod at a garden center if it is a small order, but be sure to ask the garden center when their sod is delivered, and pick it up that day. It doesn't improve with age. Your best bet might be to order your sod from a sod grower. They can probably supply the type of grass you want, and deliver the load to your lawn-to-be.

Sprigging - Some types of grasses like Centepedegrass, and Bermudagrass can be planted by "sprigging." Sprigging is incorporating small "sprigs" of grass into the prepared soil. The sprigs are sold by the bushel. Determine the number of bushels that you will need by finding the grass type in the table and calculating from your area to be sown. The sprigs are worked into the prepared soil so that some of the sprig remains above the surface of the soil.

Plugging - Zoysiagrass is usually planted by "plugging." Plugs of Zoysiagrass are planted into the soil, and allowed to spread out to cover the area. Plant the plugs on 6-12 inch centers.

Seeding - Most grasses are started from seed. Look up the type of grass you want to start in the table below to determine how many pounds of seed you need to seed your lawn. Be sure to purchase certified seed, and examine the label. The percentage of seed for the grass you want to plant should be very high. However, the percentage of weed seed, should be very low – much less than 1%. Imagine how your lawn will look if 1 of every 100 plants that result (1 % weeds) is a dandelion! Also make sure that the seed is fresh. The seed label should have a date on it, and the seed should be less than 12 months past its test date. Finally, make sure that the seed is viable. It should have a high germination rate (higher than 90%). Distribute

the seed over the turf area using a rented seeder, a spreader, or sow the seed by hand. The use of a spreader or seeder will help to ensure a more regular distribution of seed. Tamp the seed into close contact with the soil, and mulch with a bale of salt hay or clean straw per 1000 square feet.

Do I have to water?

Absolutely. No matter which method of planting nor which type of grass; the newly planted grass will require constant moisture for several weeks to become established. You will not need a long deep watering like established lawns, but you will need to moisten the newly planted turf frequently. As often as several times per day if the weather is hot or windy.

When should I do this?

This largely depends upon the type of grass that you choose. Warm-season grasses are most easily established during warm periods of the year. Cool-season grasses are best started during cooler times of the year. Look up the kind of grass you will be starting in the table, and find its best starting time.

Then what should I do?

Allow your new turf a few weeks to become established before you cut it. The new grass will have very shallow roots so make sure that you have a sharp blade on your lawnmower to avoid pulling the new grass plants out of the soil.

How can I find out more?

The best source for information regarding turf establishment and maintenance is your local Virginia Cooperative Extension Agent. There are several publications available from VCE including some articles on the Internet. Internet articles include:

<http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/envirohort/426-718/426-718.htm>

<http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/envirohort/426-717/426-717.htm>

<http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/envirohort/426-719/426-719.htm>

Useful Publications include:

Establishing Lawns. Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Environmental Horticulture, Virginia Tech
Publication Number 426-718, July 1997

Maintaining Lawns. Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Environmental Horticulture, Virginia Tech
Publication Number 426-717, July 1997

Selecting Turfgrass. Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Environmental Horticulture, Virginia Tech
Publication Number 426-719, July 1997

Grass Name	Warm or Cool Season	Planting date Northern Piedmont, areas in and west of the Blue Ridge	Planting date Southern Piedmont and Eastern Virginia	Seeding Rate for Establishment Lbs per 1000 square feet	Seeding rate for overseeding Lbs per 1000 Square feet	Spreading rate for establishment Bushels per 1000 square feet	Planting rate for establishment Plugs per 1000 square feet
Kentucky Blue Grass	Cool	Aug 15 to Sept 15 or March to early April	Sept 1 to Oct 15 or Feb and March	4-6	2-3	Not recommended	Not recommended
Tall Fescue	Cool	Aug 15 to Sept 15 or March to early April	Sept 1 to Oct 15 or Feb and March	6-9	4-6	Not recommended	Not recommended
Perennial Rye	Cool	Aug 15 to Sept 15 or March to early April	Sept 1 to Oct 15 or Feb and March	5-7	3-5	Not recommended	Not recommended
Bent Grass	Cool	Aug 15 to Sept 15 or March to early April	Sept 1 to Oct 15 or Feb and March	0.5 –1	0.5 -1	Not recommended	Not recommended
Bermudagrass ⁴	Warm	June 1 to July 15	Late May to Aug 15	1 –1.5	1-1.5	7-10	Not recommended
Zoysiagrass	Warm	June 1 to July 15	Late May to Aug 15	Not available	Not recommended	7-10	1000 - 2000 ⁵
Centepede	Warm	June 1 to July 15	Late May to Aug 15	Not available	0.25-0.5	0.75	Not recommended

⁴ Bermudagrass is available as pure seed or as unhulled seed. When using unhulled seed, plant 5-10 lbs of seed per 1000 square feet, and plant the seed late in the fall or early in the winter prior to the growing season.

⁵ Zoysiagrass Plugs should be planted on 6 to 12 inch centers.