

Question & Answer

with Rutgers University

Dr. Jim Murphy

Q: Is there a recommendation for a slow growing or “no growing” turf for business campuses converting lush full sun lawns to solar arrays with a need for turf cover underneath?

A: The best adapted grass seed would be one that includes fine fescues - 100%, by weight. Fine fescues will have the lowest mowing requirement. Hard fescue and sheep fescue will be the lowest growing and have the least need for mowing (once a year). The down side to these is sensitivity to vehicle traffic in the summer. Mowing these grasses in September or October is usually what is done in naturalized areas on golf courses. If there is an need to mow sooner, you need to wait for seedhead initiation and elongation of the flowering culm (April through May) but get the mowing done before summer stresses begin.

There are various names used to market these seed mixes such as “ecology mixes” and “naturalized mixes” and these all contain a lot of (if not only) fine fescues. I would emphasize hard fescue (30% or more) in the seed mix. Sheep fescue is another good component followed by Chewings fescue. Strong and slender creeping red fescues would be okay but I would keep these as minor components in a seed mix (25% combined).

Tall fescue will have good tolerance to shade under solar arrays but this species will require more mowing. So, you may want to avoid in a seed mix if mowing needs to be minimal. If you use tall fescue, you must avoid forage types and buy turf-type tall fescue.

Other grasses could be included but these will also add to mowing requirements and won't be as shade tolerant, so keep these as minor components: Perennial ryegrass (10% or less); Kentucky bluegrass (10% or less).

Q: Does the grass grow faster if you mow high or mow low?

A: If you mow too low, that stresses the grass, which makes it grow slower essentially because it is not healthy. Long term, mowing at too low a cutting height ends up encouraging a lot of weeds to invade and overtake the grass. Conversely, mowing higher keeps the grass healthier, which allows it to grow (which I would call normal not

“faster” growth) and keeps the weeds from invading. Therefore, low mowing to “slow down” the growth of the grass is NOT a beneficial practice; it is a counterproductive practice that damages the grass.

Q: Does bark mulch use nitrogen when it is in the process of decomposing?

A: Yes. Bark mulch does result in reduced nitrogen availability to plants. Microbes are very active at decomposing the carbon in the bark mulch; in the process, the microbes have a high demand for nitrogen and scavenge it from the soil much faster than plants can acquire it. This is one reason why mulch is so effective at controlling weeds; there is a reduced nitrogen availability to the weeds, so those plants do not grow as vigorously. .

Dr. Jim Murphy is Extension Specialist in Turfgrass Management, Rutgers University and SFMANJ Advisor

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