

TURF MANAGEMENT

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IS TALL FESCUE THE ANSWER?

Tall fescue for lawn and other turf use is on the upswing. It is very difficult for some turf enthusiasts to realize why tall fescue would ever be recommended and impossible for them to realize why such a coarse-textured grass would be used on home lawns.

First let's consider its texture. Used as forage, rough turf, or when it is present as a seed contaminant in home lawns, tall fescue definitely is a very coarse-textured, bunch type grass. However, when seeded at 6 to 8 lbs. per 1000 sq. ft., the texture is much finer and its coarseness is not obvious. A few years ago no one would have considered using it on golf courses since texture is of utmost importance. Many courses are now using tall fescue in the roughs and even a few in the fairways. Normally, bunch type, coarse grasses are not used in fairways since the ball is not held up by the turf and good clubface-ball contact is impossible. This affects the golfer's ability to control the shot. On a golf course near Ocean City where a large amount of tall fescue is used, it has not bunched, is not undesirably coarse and does not penalize the golfer. As long as good competition exists, clumpy growth and coarseness will not be a problem. This competition may be interspecies as a result of high seeding rate or among other species (tall fescue-bluegrass mix).

One of the greatest attributes of tall fescue in Maryland is its relative resistance to most common diseases. The increasing Fusarium problem on bluegrasses has resulted in a shift to tall fescue. Fusarium has not been well-characterized and control with present fungicides has been impossible. Since this is likely to be a re-occurring problem each year on those infested bluegrass lawns, a specie change is inevitable. Where bermuda and zoysia are not desirable or feasible, tall fescue is the only solution at present. Other common diseases such as dollar spot, melting out or leaf spot, and rust have not been a problem with tall fescue.

Tall fescue seems to have good insect resistance. Although it has seen limited use as a turfgrass, the normal grub, sod webworm and chinch bug problems have not been reported in Maryland. The Green Bug aphids caused considerable damage to bluegrass seedlings this past fall but Kentucky 31 tall fescue, even in mixed stands with damaged bluegrass, was not affected. This was likely a result of its good seedling vigor.

In many Maryland subdivisions, the land is denuded and the contours changed so much that the resulting soil conditions are extremely variable and fertility poor. Very often, a bluegrass-ryegrass mixture is seeded for quick cover and the homeowner is unaware of his future problems. During the following year or two after the ryegrass begins to diminish, the homeowner begins overseeding with bluegrasses and spending considerable money for special fertilizer, herbicides, insecticides, etc. to improve existing turf. Most often his efforts are worthless because of the existing topsoil characteristics (low pH and fertility, poor drainage or droughty soil). Under many of these conditions, bluegrass will not grow and weeds will overtake. The only real solution is to improve the soil

conditions by adding soil amendments, raising the pH and improving fertility. Due to a lack of capital, this is not always feasible. Consider the possibilities of tall fescue in such a situation. It also needs a good topsoil for best growth but it can tolerate various fertility and pH ranges and can withstand poor drainage or droughty conditions more so than bluegrasses. Also due to its seedling vigor, overseeding may be very successful if complete renovation is not possible. But, Be Careful! Broadcasting tall fescue seed over an existing lawn will not result in a good tall fescue turf, but one that is clumpy, variable and impossible to groom. Good soil-seed contact is necessary! Also, competition from existing turf or weed species must be kept at a minimum.

Consider the following as an overseeding method to be accomplished during September. 1. Mow existing lawn very closely. 2. Add lime and fertilizer at rate recommended by soil test. 3. Traverse lawn several times (in different directions) with a verticut (vertical mower or dethatcher) set to penetrate the soil as deep as possible. 4. Seed Kentucky 31 tall fescue at about 8 lbs. per 1000 sq. ft. 5. Either hand rake to cover seed or traverse the lawn again with the verticut. 6. Water frequently to keep surface moist and mow close until seeds begin to germinate (5 to 7 days). 7. As seeds germinate raise mower to about 2 1/2 inches and reduce irrigation frequency.

Overseeding is not the best means of establishment and may be very unsuccessful if attempted during spring when weed and existing turf competition is severe. Complete renovation, disking or rototilling fertilizer and lime into the top 6 inches of soil, is the best means of soil preparation.

Tall fescue is not a panacea in itself. It lacks a fine texture and slow growth desirable for a home lawn. Also, probably very serious, is its inability to remain dominant in a tall fescue-bluegrass mixture. The bluegrass component is needed but offers severe competition and may even dominate after a period of 5 to 10 years. This competition and eventual dominance will not, however, increase clumpiness of tall fescue unless the bluegrass is later lost as a result of insect or disease damage.

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