

Tall Fescue - Friend or Weed?

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Of over 100 recognized species of the genus Festuca, about six are used as turf grasses. These range from very fine textured to very coarse textured, and are widely adapted in the cool, humid regions of the world.

One coarse leafed and four fine-leafed fescue species are desirable and useful as turf in Michigan. The finer types include creeping red, chewings, hard and sheep fescues. These have the advantages of tolerance to light shade, and a lower water and nutrient requirement than the more widely used Kentucky bluegrasses. The greatest single weakness of these species is that no cultivar has yet been developed which has resistance to Helminthosporium leaf spot - a disease which disfigures, and may destroy, a turfed area during the warmer months of the growing season.

One wide-leafed or coarse textured fescue has recently entered the scene as having potential turf use for Michigan. This is meadow fescue, Festuca elatior; and a cultivar - Beaumont - has been developed and patented and seed is being increased. This cultivar has the ability to withstand winter stress, and appears to perform well when used for industrial lawns, golf course roughs, parks, cemeteries and roadsides - areas where fine texture and high management levels are not essential.

Tall fescue, Festuca arundinaceae is another coarse leafed species with a bunch-type growth habit that is used successfully as turf in the so-called Transition Zone of the East Central states and to a degree on the West Coast. It is also an acceptable forage species in Kentucky and surrounding states. As close to Michigan as northern Ohio and Indiana, tall fescue performs beautifully in providing solid, uniform, attractive turf cover for Interstate and Toll Road highway rights-of-way and media.

When used for lawn purposes in Michigan, however, tall fescue cultivars available thus far have a fatal flaw. They are not able to survive winter stress. Although the plant has excellent wear tolerance, when planted to solid stands on athletic fields for example, a large proportion of plants will not survive the first winter and the result is a patchy, unattractive turfed area. An exception in Michigan is the area which includes some of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Parks. For some reason, as yet unexplained, this species has survived winters well in some of these parks.

The major problem develops when tall fescue is mixed with other species and sold for home lawn purposes. Here the final result invariably is a lawn composed of fine leafed species, such as Kentucky bluegrass and red fescue, with scattered coarse leafed tall fescue plants. This results in an extremely unattractive condition.

The public has been fairly well educated that "fescue" is a good lawn grass, particularly for shade. They do not realize that tall fescue is a coarse grass with the above disadvantages. Furthermore, the most common tall fescue cultivar sold in Michigan is Kentucky 31, and many confuse this with Kentucky bluegrass, which they also know as a desirable species.

Once established in a home lawn, elimination of scattered tall fescue plants is not an easy task since no herbicide has yet been developed which will selectively kill it without damage to other turf species. Thus, the plants must be dug out manually or killed with Roundup and the respective areas re-seeded or re-sodded.

The home lawn service profession has a particular problem in that home lawn owners who pay for pre-emergence crabgrass control, and have already had a tall

fescue mixture problem, often confuse tall fescue with crabgrass plants and therefore, feel that the lawn applicator has not done an effective job.

The lawn seed industry of Michigan has been cooperative in recognizing this problem, and in working with the State of Michigan Department of Agriculture and the professional association of the lawn sprayers of the state to help provide solutions to this problem. It appears that educating the public is the most feasible approach.