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Tall Fescue Lawn Management

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Tall fescue *(Festuca arundinacea)* is one of the most popular grasses in the mountain and upper Piedmont areas of Georgia, an area that extends as far south as Atlanta. Its popularity relates to its ease of establishment through seeding and its green color during spring and fall, when warm-season turfgrasses are dormant and brown. Tall fescue is a perennial bunch-type grass that grows rapidly during spring and fall. Because of its bunch-type growth, spring preemergence herbicides generally are needed to keep a lawn relatively free of weeds.

Tall fescue is adapted to a wide range of soil conditions but grows best on fertile, well-drained soils with a soil pH of 5.5 to 6.5. It often needs irrigation to remain attractive during the summer. Established lawns tend to thin out and become clumpy, and they may need periodic reseeding every three or more years.

Kentucky 31 (K-31) is the old, common cultivar. Most of the new and more attractive cultivars are referred to as "turf-type" tall fescues. These newer grasses have finer leaf blades, lower growth habit, darker green color and greater density and shade tolerance than K-31.

The confusion between tall fescue and fine fescue was increased by the introduction of the turf-type tall fescues because they are also promoted as "fine-leafed" like the fine fescues. The tall fescues are finer leafed than K-31 but not as fine leafed as the fine fescues. The tall fescues, however, do perform better than the fine leaf fescues in Georgia.

Establishment

September and October are generally the best time to plant tall fescue. Earlier seeding tends to undergo excessive heat stress and seedling diseases, and later planting may not be fully established prior to winter. Seeding in December and early spring is generally not recommended because the plant does not have time to develop the deep root system needed to survive the hot summer.

Soil Preparation

The key to successful establishment of a lawn is proper soil preparation. First, remove all debris such as rocks and tree stumps. Add any amendments such as organic matter, sand or topsoil for soil improvement and till thoroughly into the existing soil. After initial preparation is completed and the area is properly leveled, collect a soil sample to obtain soil fertilization recommendations. Till the starter fertilizer and lime 4 to 6 inches into the soil before planting. Apply enough fertilizer to supply 1.5 to 2 pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 feet.

Seeding

Plant quality seed that is certified and identified by a blue tag. Such seed has been tested and the information on the label is assured by law. Orchardgrass is a common weed seed found in tall fescue seed and is easily seen in lawns because of its blue-green color and slightly faster growth than tall fescue. It also cannot be selectively con-trolled with a herbicide.

Plant 5 pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet using a mechanical spreader. Divide the seed into two equal parts and spread half in one direction and the other half at a right angle to the first direction. This procedure is also recommended for fertilizer or pesticide application. After seeding, lightly rake or drag the area to cover the seed to a depth of about $^1/_4$ inch, and then lightly roll the soil to firm the seedbed. Applying a straw mulch is beneficial, especially on slopes; it helps prevent erosion and retains moisture for rapid germination.

Irrigation

Irrigate lightly and often enough to prevent surface drying. This usually means daily watering of about $^1/_8$ inch for the first three weeks. As the seedlings develop, decrease the irrigation frequency and increase the amount of water applied until normal practices can be followed.

Mowing

Begin mowing at a height of $1^1/_2$ to 2 inches when the young seedlings reach 2 to $2^1/_2$ inches tall. Do not mow a grass when it is wet, especially young seedlings.

Maintenance

Fertilization

A fertilization program should be based on soil tests and desired appearance. Tall fescue will tolerate low fertility levels, but 2 to 4 pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet per year is generally recommended in Georgia. A complete fertilizer is normally applied at the rate of 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet two or three times in the fall and winter (September to February) at four- to six-week intervals. Additional nitrogen can be applied at a similar, monthly interval if you want more color and growth, but take care not to over-fertilize. If you use a slow-release nitrogen fertilizer, follow label recommendations or use this rule of thumb: If 50 percent or more of the nitrogen is in a slow-release form, apply twice the recommended amount of fertilizer half as frequently. A summer application of $^1/_2$ pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet may improve color, but avoid over-fertilization during summer months because this only adds to heat and drought stress.

Mowing

The new turf types will grow better when mowed at 2 inches but may need higher mowing during dry periods, in the summer, and under heavy shade. Use a rotary mower with sharp blades and mow often enough so no more than $^1/_3$ of the leaf height is removed. In other words, if tall fescue is being cut at 2 inches, it should be mowed when it reaches 3 inches.

Irrigation

Proper irrigation is very important to maintain a quality lawn, and tall fescue generally requires more water than other lawn grasses in Georgia. Irrigate only when the grass shows signs of moisture stress, such as off color, wilting or rolling leaves. Then apply enough water to wet the soil to a depth of 4 to 8 inches. This generally requires about 1 inch of water, which should last 7 to 10 days. Early morning is the best time to irrigate, while evening irrigation is more efficient.

Weed Control

A dense, healthy turf provides the best defense against weed invasion and other pest problems. It is very difficult, however, to maintain a nice tall fescue lawn without using a herbicide to control crabgrass. Fortunately, many preemergence and postemergence herbicides are available to use on tall fescue lawns, and preemergence herbicides applied in early spring are the preferred method of crabgrass control. Common bermudagrass invasion of tall fescue lawns is a common problem that is difficult to overcome. In some cases, an application of a non-selective herbicide that kills all vegetation is needed. The treated area then needs to be completely renovated and reseeded. For more specific weed control recommendations, contact your county extension office or refer to Georgia Extension Service Bulletin *Weed Control in Lawns.*

Diseases

Tall fescue is relatively tolerant to most turfgrass diseases if it is properly maintained. Disease problems can often be related to lack of or excess irrigation and too much nitrogen. Seedling diseases and brown patch are the most common disease problems associated with this grass. Contact your local county extension office for consultation and appropriate publications if you suspect a problem.

Insects

Many insects live in turfgrasses, but those most commonly troublesome to tall fescue are armyworms, sod webworms and white grubs. Contact your county extension office for assistance and appropriate publications if your suspect insect problems.

Reseeding

As mentioned earlier, most tall fescue lawns thin out and need periodic reseeding. Turf thinning is usually caused by improper turf management like insufficient irrigation, too much nitrogen fertilizer, seeding with more than 5 pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet, mowing too low or too high and seeding in late fall or spring. Additional problems include pests like crabgrass or white grub infestation, or disease problems like brown patch, or environmental conditions like hard compacted soil or tree shade and root competition. All of these factors, however, can be overcome with proper management.

If the lawn needs reseeding, estimate the percentage of tall fescue loss and multiply that number by the establishment seeding rate of 5 pounds per 1,000 square feet. For example, if 50 percent of the stand is dead, reseed with 50% x 5 = 2.5 pounds per 1,000 square feet. Spring reseeding is less successful because of the shorter establishment time before summer heat and moisture stress.

Getting the seed in contact with the soil is necessary to assure successful reseeding. First, mow the lawn at a height of 1 to $1^1/_2$ inches. Disturb the soil preferably by coring or vertical mowing before and/or after seed distribution. This equipment is often available at rental or garden centers. Reseed thin areas at 2 to 5 pounds per 1,000 square feet. Work the seed into the soil; although not necessary, this reduces irrigation needs. Apply a starter fertilizer at about 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet at this time. Finally, keep the soil moist as discussed for establishment. Additional information concerning turfgrass management can be obtained in the UGA Cooperative Extension publication, *Lawns in Georgia*.

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