Renovating Tall Fescue in the Fall

Story and photos by Andrew Pulls and Dr. Tom Samples

Fall is truly one of the best times for cool-season turfgrass in Tennessee. A beautiful, healthy and dense lawn in the spring is most often the result of work done the previous fall. With some planning, you can get your lawn back on track, looking its best.

First, the bad news: There really isn’t a grass perfectly suited for the climate in Tennessee. Tall fescue, one of the most well known cool-season species in Tennessee is native to southern Europe where summers are warm and dry compared to other regions of the continent. In the southeastern United States, this cool-season turfgrass grows best in spring and fall when air temperatures range from 60 to 75 F. This translates into nice turf in the spring and fall, and stressed turf in the heat and humidity of summer. If your lawn has dropped below the level of acceptable, it may be time for a total turf renovation.

TURFGRASS CASUALTY

Sooner or later, disease, insects, hot weather and drought severely damage a tall fescue lawn. For example, each spring, Rhizoctonia fungi are responsible for large patches of injured plants. White grubs, the larvae of scarab beetles, feed on roots or lift plants from soil. Direct high temperature kill occurs during summer when leaf temperatures reach 100 F or more. Excessively dry soils resulting from extended periods of drought do not supply plants with enough water. Additionally, having weak turf often leads to the invasion of weeds. Many gardeners consider the perennial weedy grass bermudagrass (Cynodon dactylon) the most serious problem weed in a tall fescue lawn. Controlling grassy weeds among desirable grasses is often very challenging.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

For best results, tall fescue seed should be planted in late summer or early fall. Seedlings emerging from soils at this time usually encounter cool, moist weather. Late summer or early fall planting provides an opportunity for plants to develop and mature in advance of high temperature, drought stresses and crabgrass competition the following summer.

STARTING OVER: PREPARING TO PLANT

First on the list of things to do is create a clean slate. By chemically removing existing plant material you are ensuring the removal of the majority of invading weed species. The application of a non-selective herbicide (e.g., glyphosate, Roundup® 4L, GLY-4®, ...) is the most typical means of doing this. This is often emotionally difficult because some areas of the lawn may still look relatively strong. However, by killing your turf along with the weeds, the age of turfgrass in your new lawn will be consistent. Different varieties of tall fescue may have slight differences in color and leaf blade width. Adding new and different in with old and established can cause frustrating variations in the look of your lawn. Often, several applications spaced several weeks apart are required to fully control existing vegetation. Always wait seven days after applying glyphosate before you plant seed. This allows sufficient time for the herbicide to be absorbed by weeds. Following the herbicide application, seeds can be planted through the dead vegetation and into soil.

Humid weather is ideal for brown patch development. Brown patch often develops when temperatures are 90 F during the day and 70 F at night.
CHOOSING YOUR VARIETY

Renovation provides an opportunity to update an existing lawn by introducing a new variety or varieties. Improved turf-type tall fescue varieties are generally darker green, finer textured, leafier and more resistant to disease than forage types. Many homeowners may wish to upgrade from a variety such as ‘Kentucky 31’, which was originally intended to be used for hay, pasture and conservation plantings. Many of the newer turf-type tall fescues have been specifically bred for attractiveness, persistence, disease resistance and overall performance. Please consult local county Extension personnel or turfgrass seed retailers for more precise information regarding tall fescues recommended for your location.

PLANTING

Seed contact with soil is critically important when planting. Soil in small areas requiring renovation can be loosened with a hand rake before seeding. Outdoor power equipment may be available for lease to renovate larger areas. Vertical mowers, power rakes, core aerifiers, slicers and spikers are used to temporarily “open” turf and expose soil before broadcast seeding. Slit-seeders are engineered to drop seed from a hopper into rows in soil as the lawn is sliced. When seeding with a device like a slit-seeder always use a criss-cross pattern, this will improve the uniformity of seed distribution. When renovating tall fescue, 5 to 6 pounds of seed are usually planted per 1,000 square feet. Additionally, a general starter fertilizer can be added at the time of seeding to jump-start developing lawngrasses.

GETTING OFF TO A GOOD START

Water, Water, Water.... Irrigation should begin soon after planting. Keep the top 2 inches of soil moist for at least 3 weeks after planting. Two to three light (e.g., 1/16-inch), daily applications of water are preferred to a limited number of soaking irrigations each week. After three to four weeks, begin applying more water less often (e.g., 1/3-inch of water per irrigation and three irrigations per week) to encourage deep rooting. Eventually, the renovated turf can be watered as needed to maintain plant growth and prevent drought. Soils containing clay hold more water than sandy soils and require less frequent irrigation. When seedlings have reached approximately 4 inches in height, mow at a cutting height of 2 1/2 inches or higher.

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