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Plant a Lawn If You Must - Some Tips

Dennis Hinkamp
Utah State University

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GARDEN NOTES

PLANT A LAWN IF YOU MUST - SOME TIPS

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Ask not how, but why, before you embark on a lawn planting project. However, if you do plant a lawn, do it right.

“To me, grass is just something to walk across while getting to the fruit trees, shrubs and flowers,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. “It is a necessary evil that, at times, seems to overtake our lives.”

If you must have a lawn, the best thing to do for it is give it a healthy start, he says. Make sure the soil is adequately prepared before you decide to plant the green stuff. Grass is a perennial plant, so it is supposed to grow for many years. The best chance for that to happen is to improve the soil before planting.

Perennial weeds growing in the area designated for the lawn need to be destroyed before preparing the soil and planting the grass, Goodspeed says. Spray them with a non-selective herbicide (such as Round-up) before working the soil. They can also be killed by solarization. This means placing a clear piece of plastic over the area for four to six weeks during the hottest part of the summer, usually starting the first of July. This method works if you plan on starting the lawn in the fall.

“After eradicating the weeds, bring in as much organic matter as possible,” he says. “Work a minimum of two to three inches into the soil. You can’t apply too much organic matter. Compost, sawdust, horse bedding material, manure, soil pep and others can all be used. Apply some nitrogen fertilizer to the area and incorporate it in along with the organic matter. This will help break down the organic matter.”

A good seed starter fertilizer can also be applied and mixed in at this time, Goodspeed says. It will help the young grass plants get off to a good start. Till the soil and organic matter as deep as possible. Once the area is well worked, make it level and prepare it for seeding. Many different types of grass seed are available. A blend of four or more Kentucky bluegrass varieties can be more expensive, but well worth it in the long run. Fescues and ryes are popular grasses, especially when planting in shady locations. These are the main cool season grasses for our area.

Broadcast the seeds evenly over the area at the recommended rate, which normally is from three to six pounds per 1,000 square feet, he says. Then, gently rake the seeds into the soil

using a leaf rake. The seeds can be pressed into the soil by using a water filled roller. This is not required, but may help get the seed settled for quicker establishment.

“Spread some organic matter lightly over the top of the newly seeded lawn to keep the seeds from drying out,” he says. “Manure or dried grass clippings work well. The idea is to use something that eventually will rot and help add organic matter to the soil.

“The new grass plants have a small root system, so they need to be watered a minimum of twice a day. Water lightly so the seeds are not moved. Be patient while waiting for the lawn to begin growing. Some grasses take up to 14 days just to germinate.”

As the grass begins to grow, increase the length of time it is watered and decrease the frequency, Goodspeed says. Within two weeks or so, it should be possible to cut back watering to just once a day. Within a month, water once every three or four days. Train the lawn while it is young to adapt to deep and infrequent watering.

“Fertilize the new lawn with a good turf builder about two months after it is planted,” he says. “Wait to apply any weed killers until the lawn is better established. Don’t worry about annual weeds that come up with the grass. A healthy lawn eventually will out-compete those wimpy weeds. Any perennial weeds can be dealt with later. Once the lawn is up and growing, take a look at your schedule and wipe out about two hours a week for pampering and fretting. You are now a lawn owner, or should I say, a lawn slave.”

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