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GARDEN NOTES

PLANNING FOR FALL LAWN REPAIR

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Fall is the best time to start a new lawn or repair the old one. In cooler temperatures less moisture is needed, and cool-season grasses prefer fall conditions.

Fall is better for seeding because lawns are used less during that time, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Grass roots can continue growing long after the cold slows the top growth and even after snow covers the ground. This gives a newly seeded lawn more time to get established before the kids use it in the spring.

The first step to the perfect lawn is creating the ideal soil, he explains. This does not require bringing in the "perfect" topsoil. In fact, most landscapes already possess good soil, they just need a little extra work. The one thing most of our soils lack is organic matter. Adding an abundant amount of leaves, grass clippings, peat moss, sawdust or compost, will make most soils ready for planting even if they are more clay or gravel than soil.

Work as much of this organic material as possible into the existing soil, he continues. Apply nitrogen fertilizer with the organic matter, then roto-till the soil as deeply as possible. Most tillers penetrate six inches deep, so work the soil to that depth to create a generous root zone. Tilling the soil encourages the roots to penetrate deeper.

You may have seen a newly planted lawn that was not roto-tilled very deep, Goodspeed says. It becomes evident when the sprinkler trenches are the first areas to green up in the spring, and the last to turn brown in the fall. The reason the grass is greener in these areas is not because the sprinkler pipes are leaking, but rather because the soil was worked deeper, giving the grass a larger water and nutrient reservoir.

Next, begin grading, he says. The first grading is generally rough. Once that is done, hire a professional to design the sprinkler system. Too many self-designed systems do not get the job done. There is a trick to designing efficient, well-planned sprinkler systems, so getting help can save a lot of grief in the future. Once the sprinkler system is in the ground, give the lawn area a final grade. Throw some lawn-starter fertilizer out on the area and work it in while grading.

There are a couple of things to keep in mind when grading a lawn area, he says. First, consider drainage. Drain lawn areas away from the house and other permanent structures. Drain grass areas towards a street, public drain or catch basin. Avoid watering your neighbor's backyard, garden or swimming pool.

"The other thing to watch when grading a new lawn is the steepness of the grade," Goodspeed says. "Remember, lawns do better and can be watered easier if they aren't growing on a berm used for a ski jump in the winter. Keep lawn areas as flat as possible."

Now, spread the grass seed out on the ground, he says. Get quality lawn seed since you get what you pay for. Talk to your local certified nursery person about the different lawn seeds available. They can also recommend an application rate somewhere between three and six pounds per 1,000 square feet. Throw the seed down using a spreader; the more uniformly it's applied the better. Once the lawn is seeded, gently rake the seed into the soil; then cover it with a light dusting of straw, peat moss or compost as a protective covering, and to hold the moisture around the seed.

"Now the work is done and the fun begins," he says. "Water new seeds enough to keep them moist. This usually requires a light watering two to three times a day until the lawn starts to emerge and grow. Once the grass blades are up, start watering deeper and less frequently. Within a month or two, only water it once every few days."

The last thing to do is hope we get an early snowfall, he says. Grass roots continue to grow under the snow, so next spring a beautiful lawn should emerge all ready for mowing, weeding, fertilizing, aerating and a bunch of other work or, you may want to reconsider the lawn altogether.

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