

SPRING SEEDING A HOME LAWN

Lawns are usually established by direct seeding or laying sod (live strips of grass). While sod can be planted throughout the growing season, early spring and fall are the best times to seed new lawns, spot seed, and over-seed to thicken existing lawns.

Fall is the preferred time because competition from newly sprouting weeds is much less, and soils are warmer and more favorable for seed germination. Also, spring downpours can keep soil cool and soggy; wider temperature swings that create less than favorable conditions for good seedling growth are also common. But with proper timing and preparation, you can spring seed to cover bare soil areas around newly constructed homes or where loss of turf has occurred on an existing lawn.

For Southern Illinois, seeding is best done during March and into the first week or two of April.

Starting a New Lawn

When establishing a new turf on a large area, a soil test should be taken to determine available plant nutrients and soil pH. Depending on residual levels, two key plant nutrients, phosphorus and potassium, may need to be increased. If the pH is less than 6.0, limestone should also be added to increase pH and reduce soil acidity. Incorporate these “base”



amendments 4 to 6 inches with a roto-tiller. Your local U of I Extension office can put you in contact with a horticulture expert for advice on taking and interpreting your soil test, and they can help make specific recommendations for your site.

Following tilling of the area and base fertilizer application, rake the area out to a final grade, with at least a 1 to 2 percent slope away from buildings. Use a roller to firm the seed bed and expose any depressions and high spots that may need additional leveling.

Prior to seeding, “starter” nitrogen fertilizer can be added to boost early seedling growth. Apply no more than ½ to 1 pound of nitrogen per 1000 square feet of lawn area. Using a standard blend of 10-10-10 fertilizer that provides 10 percent nitrogen, 5 to 10 pounds of fertilizer is all that is needed for a 1000-square-foot area. If adequate phosphorus and

potassium were applied earlier, 2 to 5 pounds of a nitrogen-only fertilizer, such as ammonium sulfate (21-0-0) can be used. Be sure to use a fertilizer spreader to evenly broadcast the material and help prevent over-applying, which can burn young seedlings. Starter fertilizer should be applied to the surface at the time of seeding.

Evenly broadcast the seed at the rate recommended for the specific lawn grass type. For bluegrass, apply 1 to 3 pounds per 1000 square feet; fine fescues, 3 to 4 pounds; and for turf-type tall fescues and perennial ryegrass, apply 4 to 6 pounds per 1000 square feet. For blends such as fine fescues and Kentucky bluegrass for shady areas use 3 to 4 pounds in a 50/50 mix. For high traffic areas and slopes, use an 80/20 blend of Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass at 2 to 3 pounds per 1000 square feet.

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Because of intensive weed competition in the spring and more variable stand establishment, use the higher range of the seeding rate, but do not over-apply, which creates excessive competition and ultimately weaker seedling stands.

Once the seed has been applied, it should be lightly raked using a leaf rake, and/or pressed down with a roller to ensure good soil-to-seed contact. Although the seed will germinate and grow when laying on the surface, good soil contact is still needed. Do not cover seed with more than ¼ inch of soil.

Watering is essential to good germination and establishment. Depending on rainfall, temperature and humidity, the area should be lightly watered one to three times a day for the first two weeks. Always irrigate to moisten the soil and start the germination and growing process, but avoid excessive watering, which is detrimental to developing plants. Application of a light straw mulch (1 bale per 1000 square feet) will help to reduce soil drying and provide a more even environment for germination and seedling growth. Be sure that straw is not clumped, which will smother and shade new seedlings.

Spot Seeding Bare Areas

For spot-seeding bare areas, scratch the soil surface using a hard rake or de-thatching tine. If the area is low, soil should be top-dressed to reduce standing water after a rain. Apply seed, and then lightly rake and press down with a roller or flat board. Water as with a new lawn area, and use straw mulch if the area tends to dry out quickly. Do not use a starter fertilizer. Spot-seeded areas should be fertilized four to six weeks later in mid-May, along with the rest of the lawn.

Over-Seeding Lawns

To over-seed existing lawns and thicken the stand, the lower seeding rate should be used. For best results, top-dress the lawn area before seeding with a thin layer of fine soil using a drop-type spreader or by hand. This will increase soil-to-seed contact and improve the seedling environment.

As with spot-seeding, this is a good time to apply a layer of soil to low areas and improve the lawn grade. When seeding into existing turf, rake the area after seeding to encourage the seed to filter down and make as much contact with exposed soil as possible; this raking will also lessen seed deposit in the thatch layer. Rolling can also help improve seed contact with soil and thatch. However, in thicker

lawns, most seed will germinate in the thatch layer, which can dry more quickly than soil. Thus, proper watering is important to success. Frequent, light watering is always preferable and should be done for up to three weeks after over-seeding while the seedlings are rooting through the thatch layer into the soil.

For All Types of Seeding

For all types of spring seeding, fertilize seedlings when they have reached a 2-inch height. Preferably, this will be done in early to mid-May, which is the recommended time for spring lawn fertilization. Apply no more than 1 pound of actual nitrogen per 1000 square feet. A second fertilizer application is not recommended again until the fall.

Fertilizer should always be applied to dry grass, and then immediately watered in to reduce burning. When new grass is being established, avoid fertilizers that contain crabgrass control and other weed-preventing chemicals. These materials affect germinating seeds and can damage germinating and new grass seedlings.

Weed germination is a problem with spring seeding that can affect the final results. Although most weed prevention herbicides should be avoided with a new

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lawn, an exception is Tupersan (chemical name siduron), a herbicide that is labeled for use at seeding time to control crabgrass and other weeds. It can be applied to the surface after the areas have been seeded.

Tupersan can be purchased mixed with fertilizer, and thus be applied as the starter fertilizer application recommended for establishment.

In addition to grassy weeds such as crabgrass, broadleaf weeds like dandelions will also germinate with your spring-seeded lawn. These weeds are best controlled by a foliar application of a broadleaf weed herbicide later in the summer. Wait until the turf has been mowed at least two to three times, and at least six to eight weeks after seeding.

Always carefully follow label directions when applying any chemical product.

Lastly, a newly spring-seeded area should not be mowed until the foliage has grown to about 50 percent higher than the desired final height. For example, with a lawn that is to be maintained at 2 inches, the new grass should receive its first and all subsequent cuttings when it is 3 inches tall. For new seedlings, it is especially important to keep the mower blade sharp because the seedlings can be easily pulled out of the soil by a dull blade. As the summer progresses, newly seeded areas should be watered because root systems are not as well developed as an established turf, and new roots cannot endure drought as well. Newly seeded areas need about 1 inch of water per week.

Success can be achieved with spring-seeding of lawns, however it is more challenging than seeding in the fall when soils are warmer and temperatures are less variable. Another option is to use live sod, but it is more expensive.

By paying attention to details and following up with sound weed control measures, a quality turf can be established with spring seeding.

More information on turf selection, establishment, and maintenance is provided in these two inexpensive and informative U of I publications:

- *Turfgrass Selection and Establishment* (#U5008a)
- *Turfgrass Maintenance in the Midwest* (#U5009)

Both of these publications can be ordered through county U of I Extension offices.

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