TURFGRASS

Is My Lawn Still Alive?

Many lawns have gone dormant recently due to hot conditions and a lack of moisture. Homeowners often wonder if dormant grass is still alive. Healthy lawns can go dormant for 5 to 8 weeks without harm and so most lawns should be fine. However, to be sure, pull up an individual plant and separate the leaves from the crown. The crown resembles a grain of rice and is the area between the leaves and the roots. If it is still hard and not papery and dry, the plant is still alive.

If you wish to pull the lawn out of dormancy, water to a depth of 6 to 8 inches each week. The lawn will begin to grow and eventually green up. However, it is better to let a lawn remain dormant than to water enough to pull it out of dormancy and then allow it to go dormant again. Stored energy reserves are used each time a plant has to come out of dormancy and eventually the plant will deplete these reserves and die. (WU)

Fall Lawn Seeding Tips

The keys to successful lawn seeding are proper rates, even dispersal, good seed to soil contact and proper watering. Evenness is best achieved by carefully calibrating the seeder or by adjusting the seeder to a low setting and making several passes to ensure even distribution. Seeding a little on the heavy side with close overlapping is better than missing areas altogether, especially for the bunch-type tall fescue, which does not spread. Multiple seeder passes in opposite directions should help avoid this problem.
A more serious error in seeding is using the improper rate. For tall fescue, aim for 6 to 8 pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet for new areas and about half as much for overseeding or seeding areas in the shade. Using too much seed results in a lawn more prone to disease and damage from stress. The best way to avoid such a mistake is to determine the square footage of the yard first, and then calculate the amount of seed. Using too little seed can also be detrimental and result in clumpy turf that is not as visually pleasing.

Establishing good seed to soil contact is essential for good germination rates. Slit seeders achieve good contact at the time of seeding by dropping seed directly behind the blade that slices a furrow into the soil. Packing wheels then follow to close the furrow. The same result can be accomplished by using a verticut before broadcasting the seed, and then verticutting a second time.

Core aerators can also be used to seed grass. Go over an area at least three times in different directions, and then broadcast the seed. Germination will occur in the aeration holes. Because those holes stay moister than a traditional seedbed, this method requires less watering. If seeding worked soil, use light hand raking to mix the seed into the soil. A leaf rake often works better than a garden rake because it mixes seed more shallowly.

Water newly planted areas lightly, but often. Keep soil constantly moist but not waterlogged. During hot days, a new lawn may need to be watered three times a day. If watered less, germination will be slowed. Cool, calm days may require watering only every couple of days. As the grass plants come up, gradually decrease watering to once a week if there is no rain. Let the plants tell you when to water. If you can push the blades down and they don't spring back up quickly, the lawn needs water.

Once seed sprouts, try to minimize how much traffic (foot, mower, dog, etc.) seeded areas receive until the seedlings are a little more robust and ready to be mowed. Begin mowing once seedlings reach 3 to 4 inches tall. (WU)

**For Seeding Success, Pay Attention to "Other Crop" on the Seed Label**

Fall planting time is close at hand, so it's time to talk about grass seed. Many people have the idea that all grass seed is basically the same. Big mistake! Choosing quality seed is one of the most important steps in successfully planting or overseeding your lawn. If you don't know what to look for, you may be introducing unwanted intruders into that new stand. In particular, we are concerned with seed contaminated with orchardgrass and/or rough bluegrass (also known by its Latin name, Poa trivialis, or Poa triv for short). These are both perennial grassy weeds that cannot be selectively controlled once they are in a lawn. Orchardgrass is a problem because it is faster growing and lighter green than our turfgrasses. It is a bunch grass and so doesn’t spread, but infested areas are still unsightly due to small tufts of this species pockmarking the lawn. Rough bluegrass is fine-textured and forms circular patches in the lawn. It blends in fairly well until summertime heat causes it to turn brown.
rapidly. If the rough bluegrass would just die in the heat, it would only be a temporary problem. Unfortunately, it usually just goes dormant, turning green again with cooler temperatures and rain.

Buying quality seed starts with knowing how to decipher the seed label. One of the most important things to look for is listed as "% other crop". "Other crop" refers to any species that is intentionally grown for some purpose. That would include turfgrasses (those species other than the one you are buying) and pasture grasses. Orchardgrass and rough bluegrass both are listed as “other crop” seed. Seed labels are required by law to show the percentage (by weight) of "other crop" in the bag, but unless a species constitutes 5% or more, the label doesn't have to list each species by name.

How much "other crop" is too much? That’s a difficult question to answer, but the tolerance is very low. It depends on what the "other crop" actually is, and the quality expectations of the buyer. In practice, "other crop" may refer to something relatively harmless, like a small amount of perennial ryegrass in a bag of tall fescue, or it may refer to something bad, like rough bluegrass or orchardgrass. The homeowner really has no easy way of knowing what the "other crop" is, although there are some tip-offs. If it is something bad, less than ½ of 1% can ruin a bag of seed. For example, if a bag of tall fescue seed contained 0.5% orchardgrass, the buyer would end up "planting" 12 to 16 orchardgrass seeds per square foot! Similarly, planting Kentucky bluegrass seed containing 0.5% rough bluegrass would result in about 25 to 35 rough bluegrass seeds per square foot of lawn. Obviously, if your expectations are high for the area you are planting, you would want the "other crop" to be as close to zero as possible. Good quality seed will often have 0.01% “other crop” or less.

I was looking at tall fescue seed this last weekend and noticed a blend of improved tall fescue varieties that had 0.0% weed seed and 0.0% other crop seed. A bag of K-31 tall fescue right next to the improved tall fescue had more than 2.5% other crop seed. This is all too common with K-31. It is well worth the extra cost to get good quality seed. (WU)

Lawns in Shade

We are often asked, “What’s the best shade grass for Kansas?” The answer is simple but requires explanation. Tall fescue is the best shade grass for Kansas. That does not mean that tall fescue is a super shade grass. True fine leaf fescues such as sheep’s fescue, hard fescue, and creeping red fescue are actually better adapted to shade than tall fescue, but they have difficulty surviving Kansas summers. It might be better to say that tall fescue is the best shade grass adapted to Kansas conditions. But large trees that produce deep shade will not allow tall fescue to survive over the long term. I say “over the long term” because fall-planted cool-season grasses will often do well under shade trees through the fall and spring when there is less leaf cover and growing conditions are better (cooler and moister) than in the summer. We
often see people plant tall fescue in the shade each fall and then wonder what happens the following summer. The answer is stress from multiple fronts. Sunlight that passes through the leaves of trees has had most of the “good” light that drives photosynthesis stripped out. The grass struggles to make the food it needs for survival and growth. When this poor diet is combined with the additional stresses of drought and heat, tall fescue is unable to survive.

For those who insist on continuing to try to grow grass in shade, go with a much lighter seeding rate. Where we usually recommend 6 to 8 lbs of fescue seed per 1,000 sq ft, shady areas should be planted to 1/2 that rate, 3 to 4 lbs per 1,000 sq ft. The decreased light levels will not support a thick, plush lawn. Tall Fescue planted at this 1/2 rate will survive longer. Think about it, it is only logical that less light will not support more plants. The turf will be thinner, but it will be much healthier at the lighter seeding rate. But this will work only if the shade is not too deep.

So what should you do if you have too much shade for your turf? You have three choices. Reduce the shade by pruning up the lower branches of your trees so more early and late sun reaches the turf. This is not practical with many trees because it can destroy the desired shape. A second option is to plant a groundcover that is well adapted to shady sites such as periwinkle or English ivy. Another solution would be to mulch the area under the tree. (WU)

**Rhizomatous Tall Fescue Varieties**

Rhizomes are underground stems that allow a grass to spread. Therefore, a rhizomatous grass is desirable because it can thicken a grass stand if it thins. All tall fescue varieties have mini-rhizomes but there are some that have more aggressive rhizomes than others. Often these are called rhizomatous tall fescues or RTF types.

Our turfgrass research team has tested these grasses to see how well they would do under Kansas conditions. Tall fescues evaluated were Grande II, Regiment II, Barlexus, Water Saver RTF tall fescue blend (39.84 Labarinth; 29.93 Barlexus II; 29.86 Barrington), and Kentucky-31. SR2284 Kentucky bluegrass was also included. Grande II, Regiment II, and the Water Saver RTF blend (particularly the Labarinth cultivar in the blend) are purported to be more prolific rhizome producers. The Barlexus and K-31 are non-RTF types that provided a check to evaluate how much more quickly the RTF types can spread. Kentucky bluegrass was included because it produces long rhizomes and made a good comparison to the spreading ability of these new tall fescue varieties. So, to summarize, we had Kentucky bluegrass, which spreads quickly, non-RTF
tall fescues, which should spread very slowly, and RTF tall fescues, which were purported to be
intermediate in spreading ability.

Our study was established in 2006 and was composed of two parts. In one part, we placed 4-inch
diameter plugs of each turfgrass variety in bare ground and then measured how many rhizomes
were produced. We also measured the diameter of the clump as it spread. In the second part, we
removed all the turf in a 12" diameter circle in the middle of established plots of each variety. We
then measured how much the size of the bare area decreased over time.

In short we found that Kentucky bluegrass produced more rhizomes and covered the bare areas
more quickly than any tall fescue variety. Also, no tall fescue variety produced more rhizomes or
spread more quickly than any other. Therefore, we cannot recommend RTF varieties over
non-RTF varieties based on their spreading potential. (WU)

**VEGETABLES**

**Still Time for Salad Garden**

Plant salad crops such as lettuce, radishes, spinach, turnips, mustard and other greens now for a
fall harvest. Cooler nights make this an ideal year to try a fall salad garden. Plant slightly deeper than you did in the spring.
Water frequently (if needed) until seedlings start to emerge — which should be fast with our warmer soils. Reduce watering
frequency after plants emerge. (WU)

**Preparing the Vegetable Garden for Next Year**

If there are areas of the garden that are done producing, chop and shred residue in preparation
for tilling. But the recent extreme heat and drought may make tilling difficult. Wait until a soaking
rain softens the soil, then wait a few days so the soil is no longer muddy. Tilling in residue allows
plant material to decompose and helps reduce insect and disease problems for the next year.

Also consider using a cover crop to hold the soil and increase the organic matter content of the
soil. Small gains such as wheat should be seeded at 3/4 to 1 pound of seed per 1,000 square feet
from mid-September to late October. Legume cover crops such as hairy vetch, alfalfa and
sweetclover provide an additional benefit by ‘fixing’ nitrogen, thereby increasing fertility of the soil. Each of these should be seeded at about 1/4 to ½ pound of seed per 1,000 square feet of garden. Sweetclover should be seeded during from August to early September and hairy vetch and alfalfa from mid-August to late September. (WU)

**PESTS**

**Pine Needle Scale Control Window Approaching**

Pine needle scale is an armored scale that is found across the United States but especially in the eastern half of the country. It not only attacks pine but also feeds on spruce, fir, hemlock, and, occasionally, yew and cedar. Pine needle scale appears as conspicuous white specks on the needles. Scales feed by sucking sap from needles causing them to yellow and eventually brown. Heavy infestations can kill twigs, branches and even entire trees.

Though both female and males are white, the female is larger (1/8-inch long) and wider at one end with the narrow end sporting a yellow or orange cap. Males are 1/32-inch long and narrow. Crawlers are bright red to brown.

Pine needle scale overwinters as eggs underneath female covers. Each female produces about 100 eggs. There are two generations per year in Kansas with crawlers appearing in May to early June and again in August. So now is the time to start looking for the second-generation crawlers. Use a hand lens to look for the crawlers.

Dormant oil treatments can be applied in early spring to kill overwintering eggs, or insecticides can be applied to exposed first or second-generation crawlers. Effective insecticides include but are not limited to acephate (Acephate, Orthene), cyfluthrin (Tempo, PowerForce Multi-Insect Killer), and permethrin (numerous trade name). Remember, insecticides must be applied to crawlers soon after they emerge. Once the scale has settled down and formed its waxy cover, insecticides are ineffective. (WU)

**Flatid Planthoppers**

These small, hopping insects are causing concern among gardeners because they are so noticeable. What people often see first is not the insect but the filaments of white, wool-like wax they leave behind. Nymphs are also coated with this white, powdery wax but adults of the species I've observed (citrus planthopper?) are more of a grayish color with a darker rear end. Only the adults have wings
that are held over the body like a pup tent. Nymphs are more flattened and may not appear to be insects at first because of the waxy coating.

Plant injury due to these insects is usually minor. Feeding by large populations may kill seedlings or wilt small twigs of larger plants. Control is usually not recommended because natural enemies often keep flatid planthoppers in check. If control is warranted, a strong stream of water from a hose should knock them off, or a number of insecticides may be used including malathion, permethrin, cyfluthrin, and bifenthrin. For a detailed description, check out the University of Georgia Bugwood page at http://www.forestpests.org/ash/flatidplant.html (WU)

To view Upcoming Events: http://tinyurl.com/fswqe

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