Dwarf Fescues? Thin Leaved Fescues? RTF? Which Fescue Do I Plant?

Since September is the time to seed and overseed cool-season lawns in the Midwest, I’ve been getting questions about what type and variety of grass to plant. But when I talk about tall fescue, inevitably, I get questions like these: “What about those fine bladed tall fescues?….I want that. Where do I get that type of tall fescue?” or “I want one of those dwarf tall fescues, or low grow, low mow tall fescues.”

So, what they are asking for is what the turf industry calls “turf-type tall fescue.” And essentially turf-type tall fescues are just about any variety of tall fescue that is not Kentucky 31 (K-31) tall fescue. K-31 is essentially a forage type of fescue. It grows very rapidly (so you have to mow more often), it has a lighter green color (so many people fertilize it more, which leads to more growing and mowing), it has a very coarse, wide leaf blade (that can be irritating to soft bare feet), and it is not as dense as Kentucky bluegrass or turf-type tall fescues (which could lead to more weed seed germination). With that being said, I don’t hate K-31 and it has its use in the landscape. Typically, K-31 will have a deeper root system and can avoid more drought than the improved turf-type tall fescues. I generally recommend K-31 for lower maintenance areas of parks or larger acreage homesteads. That is, I’ll recommend at turf-type tall fescue in the areas of the park or the area right around the house that is desired to have a higher quality lawn surface, and then plant K-31 farther out away from the house where you want a nice lawn area to look at, but not really use.

So, back to this name, turf-type tall fescue. They are called turf-type tall fescues, because they have been bred to more closely resemble the desirable traits of Kentucky bluegrass. That is, finer leaf blade, lower growing, less mowing, darker green color, etc. Let me say, while the blades of turf-type TF are thinner than K-31, they still are not as thin as Kentucky bluegrass. (RS)

Fine Leaved Fescues
Just for your info, there are a group of fescues that the turf industry call fine leaved fescues or fine leaf fescues or fine fescues. These fescues include several fescue species; creeping red fescue, sheeps fescue, hard fescue, and others. These fescues have a very, very fine leaf blade, a
gray-green color and look very different compared to tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass. Generally, I don’t recommend fine fescues in Kansas. Most of them don’t tolerate the high heat and droughts of KS.

**RTF fescue**

The next question I get about fescues is usually about rhizomatous tall fescues, or RTF. Just to get everyone on the same page, tall fescues are classified as a bunch type grass or a clump forming grass. It does not spread out across the lawn with rhizomes like Kentucky bluegrass or with stolons and rhizomes like Bermudagrass or zoysiagrass. So when we get some damage in a tall fescue lawn from a dog digging, drought damage, or anything, and there is a hole or thin area in the tall fescue lawn, the only way to fix that area is to re-seed it or re-sod it. Small damaged areas in a Kentucky bluegrass or bermudagrass lawns will fill back in with a little water, fertilizer and time. Grass producers have developed what they call Rhizomatous tall fescue, or tall fescue that produces rhizomes and can spread the grass out across the lawn.

That sounds great. However, in most of the field research I’ve read and the research we conducted at KSU, the RTF fescues don’t spread any faster than normal turf-type tall fescues. The RTF varieties generally performed just like any other turf-type tall fescue in terms of color, density, and appearance. So the RTF varieties should act like and give a good tall fescue lawn, but don’t expect them to spread like Kentucky bluegrass.

That research is a couple of years old, and new varieties have come out since that research was conducted. So it is possible these newer varieties perform better, but I’d take any claims about the ability to spread with a grain of salt. (RSJ)

**ORNAMENTALS**

**Trees Losing Their Leaves**

We are seeing a number of tree species losing leaves this year. Causes vary from insects (fall webworm, walnut caterpillars, yellownecked caterpillars) to diseases (mycosphaerella leaf spot on green ash, walnut anthracnose on walnut) to stress (summer dormancy on hackberry, severe scorch on others). Otherwise healthy deciduous trees that lose their leaves this late in the season are not harmed. They have had plenty of time to make the food necessary to survive the winter.

Leaf loss early in the season (i.e., sycamore anthracnose in May) is not much of a concern because the tree will releaf and has plenty of time to recover before winter. We do worry when leaves are lost in the middle of summer (July), especially if the tree tries to throw out a new set of leaves. The tree uses a great deal of energy to releaf and doesn’t have much time to make it back before winter arrives. We also worry when leaves turn completely brown and do not drop from the tree. This may mean the tree has died. In such cases, bend the twigs to make sure they are supple and not brittle. Brittle twigs mean that part of the tree is dead.
Though deciduous trees are not harmed from leaf loss this late, some needled evergreens may be. For example, bagworms stripping junipers in August can cause severe damage or even death of the plant. Bagworms are done feeding for the year, and we are too late to control bagworms this year anyway (except by hand picking), but we can help stressed plants by watering during dry weather. (WU)

It's Pine Wilt Time Again

This time of year we see an increase in pine wilt symptoms, and this year is no exception. Though sometimes detected in white pine, Austrian pine and Loblolly pine, Scots pine is the primary host. Needles on affected trees initially turn a dull gray-green. In most cases, the foliage on the entire tree is affected at the same time, although sometimes you will see individual branches affected first. In contrast, the Diplodia tip blight disease most often causes the tips of individual branches to turn tan to brown. As pine wilt progresses, the needles turn from dull green to brown and remain attached to the tree. The color change normally occurs within a couple of weeks but occasionally may be stretched out over several months. Eventually, the tree dies.

Trees with pine wilt cannot be saved. Any tree suspected of having this disease should be cut at ground level and removed from the site. Do not save the wood for firewood because it serves as a breeding ground for the pine sawyer insect. Diseased trees may be chipped, but I advise composting the chips for several months before using them in the landscape.

Currently, there are no chemical controls that will cure pine wilt in an already infected tree. However, we do have a couple of products that are partially effective as preventative injections. Greyhound and Pinetect both resulted in an 80 to 90 percent survival rate as opposed to 40 to 50 percent in untreated trees. (WU)

MISCELLANEOUS

Pokeweed

We have had a number of people wanting to know the name of the weed with the large leaves and purple-black berries that hang in a cluster. This perennial is known as pokeweed. All parts of this plant are poisonous, especially the roots. Signs of poisoning include abdominal cramps, diarrhea, vomiting, weakness, drowsiness and difficulty in breathing. One of the toxins found in pokeweed is the protein lectin which can cause abnormalities in
white blood cells.

Surprisingly, young leafy springtime shoots are sometimes eaten after thorough cooking. Though cooking eliminates most of the toxins, there is still a danger of being poisoned from handling and preparing the shoots as well as ingesting improperly cooked plants.

The berries of this plant can be attractive to children. Cut down and discard any pokeweed that might come into contact with kids. (WU)

**Harvesting and Curing Black Walnut**

Black walnuts are ready to be harvested when the hull can be dented with your thumb. You can also wait until the nuts start falling from the tree. Either way it is important to hull walnuts soon after harvest. If not removed, the hull will leach a stain through the nut and into the meat. The stain will not only discolor the meats but also give them an off flavor.

Hull walnuts by running them through a corn sheller or pounding each nut through a hole in a board. The hole must be big enough for the nut but smaller than the hull. Wash hulled nuts by spreading them out on the lawn or on a wire mesh and spraying them with water or placing them in a tub of water. If you place them in a tub, the good nuts should sink. Those that float are probably not well-filled with kernels. Next, dry the nuts by spreading them in layers no more than three deep in a cool, shady and dry place such as a garage or tool shed. Drying normally takes two weeks. (WU)

**Reblooming Christmas and Thanksgiving Cacti**

Christmas Cactus (Schlumbergera bridgesii) and Thanksgiving Cactus (Schlumbergera truncata) are popular flowering holiday plants. Both are epiphytes native to the jungles of South America. Epiphytic plants grow on other plants and use them for support but not for nutrients. Though these cacti are different species, they will hybridize and produce varying stem shapes. Christmas cactus normally has smooth stem segments. Thanksgiving Cactus has hook-like appendages on each segment.

Flowering will not occur unless induced by temperature and/or light treatment. If the temperature is held at 50 to 55 degrees F, flowering will occur regardless of day length. But flowering usually is not uniform. Temperatures below 50 degrees F prevent flowering. Nights greater than 12 hours long and temperatures between 59 and 69 degrees also can generate flowers. Twenty-five consecutive long nights is enough for flower initiation. Nights will naturally become greater than
12 hours close to the fall equinox which is on September 23 this year. Therefore a plant receiving natural sunlight but no artificial light during night hours, will have this 25 day requirement met about October 20. It takes an additional nine to 10 weeks for flowers to complete development and bloom.

Both of these cacti like bright indirect light. Too much sun may cause leaves to turn yellow. Common household temperatures are fine. Keep soil constantly moist but not waterlogged. These plants seem to flower best if kept a little pot bound. If you need to repot, try waiting until spring. (WU)

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