Turfgrass

Overseeding a Lawn

Tall fescue lawns that have become thin over the summer can be thickened up by overseeding during September. Start by mowing the grass short (1 to 1.5 inches) and removing the clippings. This will make it easier to achieve good seed-soil contact and increase the amount of light that will reach the young seedlings.

Good seed-soil contact is vital if the overseeding is to be successful. Excess thatch can prevent seed from reaching the soil and germinating. Normally we want 1/4 inch of thatch or less when overseeding. If the thatch layer is 3/4 inch or more, it is usually easiest to use a sod cutter to remove it and start over with a new lawn. A power rake can be used to reduce a thatch layer that is less than 3/4 inch but more than a quarter inch.

Once thatch is under control, the soil should be prepared for the seed. This can be done in various ways. A verticut machine has solid vertical blades that can be set to cut furrows in the soil. It is best to go two different directions with the machine. A slit seeder is a verticut machine with a seed hopper added so the soil prep and seeding operation are combined. A third option is to use a core aerator.

The core aerator will punch holes in the soil and deposit the soil cores on the surface of the ground. Each hole produces an excellent environment for seed germination and growth. Make three to four passes with the core aerator to insure enough holes for the seed. Using a core aerator has the additional benefit of reducing the amount of watering needed to get the seed germinated and growing. Aeration also increases the water infiltration rate, decreases compaction, and increases the amount of oxygen in the soil. Fertilizer should then be applied at the rate suggested by a soil test, or a starter fertilizer should be used at the rate suggested on the bag.
Seeding is the next step and is usually done with half the amount of seed used when working with bare ground. For tall fescue, the normal rate is 6 to 8 pounds per 1,000 square feet, and so the overseeding rate is 3 to 4 pounds per 1,000 square feet.

The seed should be broadcast or applied using a drop spreader over the prepared area. Water everything in and then keep the seedbed constantly moist to ensure rapid germination. Frequent, light waterings should give way to deeper and more infrequent irrigation as seedlings become established. Fertilize again 4 to 6 weeks after seeding to keep plants growing well and to build up food reserves. Use a high-nitrogen fertilizer. (Ward Upham)

**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 verticing 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. (Ward Upham)

**ORNAMENTALS**

**Twig Dieback on Oak**

Recently we have seen twig dieback on pin and other oaks caused by a fungal disease called Botryosphaeria canker. Affected trees show wilting or “flagging” of terminal growth on the ends of branches. Dieback usually extends 4 to 6 inches down the twig with leaves bending back toward the twig before turning brown. Dead leaves remain attached to the tree. If you look closely at the twig, you should see a rather marked transition from healthy to diseased tissue. Take a knife and scrape away some of the outer bark tissue. Healthy tissue is light green. Diseased tissue tends to be brown to black.

Botryosphaeria canker differs from oak wilt in that only the tips of branches are affected. Oak wilt affects whole branches. This disease causes such minor damage that chemical control measures are unwarranted. Dead twigs on small trees may be pruned off if desired. (Ward Upham)

**Mycosphaerella Leaf Spot on Ash**

We often see a great deal of mycosphaerella leaf spot on ash trees in areas that had wet summers. This year will likely be no exception. We haven’t seen a great deal of this disease yet but be on the lookout. With all the concern about Emerald Ash Borer (EAB), many people will probably assume the trees are being attacked by EAB.

Small, brown spots can enlarge to become blotches and may result in early leaf drop. Though this disease looks serious, it is not. Defoliation this late in the growing season will not hurt the health of the tree. Therefore, because this disease appears sporadically and tree health is not harmed, we do not recommend treatment. Furthermore, treatment would have to be preventative and applied before the disease had infected the leaves. Applying a fungicide now would have no effect. (Ward Upham)
FRUIT

Pear Harvest

Pears should not be allowed to ripen on the tree. They should be picked while still firm and ripened after harvest. Tree-ripened fruits are of poor quality because of the development of grit cells and the browning and softening of the inner flesh. Commercial growers determine the best time to harvest pears by measuring the decrease in fruit firmness as the fruit matures. This varies with growing conditions and variety. A Magness meter is used for testing and measures the pressure needed to push a 5/16-inch tip a specified distance into an individual fruit. Home gardeners can use these other indicators:

1. A change in the fruit ground color from a dark green to light green or yellowish green. The ground color is the "background" color of the fruit.
2. Fruit should part easily from the branch when it is lifted up and twisted.
3. Corking over of lenticels. Lenticels are the "breathing pores" of the fruit. They start out as a white to greenish white color and turn brown due to corking as the fruit nears maturity. They look like brown “specks” on the fruit.
4. Development of characteristic pear aroma and taste of sampled fruit.

Pears ripen in one to three weeks after harvest if held at 60 to 65 degrees F. They can then be canned or preserved. If you wish to store some for ripening later, fresh-picked fruit should be placed in cold storage at 29 to 31 degrees F and 90 percent humidity. Ripen small amounts as needed by moving them to a warmer location and holding them at 60 to 65 degrees F. Storing at too high a temperature (75 degrees F and higher) will result in the fruit breaking down without ripening. (Ward Upham)

FLOWERS

Panicle Hydrangea

I’ve been waiting for a year to tell you about this plant. A year ago, right about this time, I had my photo professionally taken next to a gorgeous panicle hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata*). It was in full bloom with large white inflorescences that looked just perfect as the blurred background of a horticulturist’s headshot. I loved it! I jetted out of town shortly after the photo session and didn’t get back to the garden when I returned. I missed the
show. And the only pictures I had of it had beautiful bokeh effect (blurred background), but no
detail to share.

We’ve been on panicle hydrangea bloom watch for a couple of weeks now. This year, I’m a little
early to the show for this article, but you can anticipate the profusion of white flowers to follow
the buds in these photos. Perfect for an early August wedding or just plain enjoyment in your
own garden space.

Hydrangeas can sometimes be tricky. Our high soil pH is commonly a problem for many
species, but not panicle hydrangea which is pH adaptable. There are quite a few wonderful
cultivars from which to choose within the *H. paniculata* species (I’ll save other species of
Hydrangea for future articles). In the case of panicle hydrangea, the main guideline is that they
need more water during times of drought than the average low-maintenance shrub. Yes, I realize
this is in stark contrast to the xeriscape recommendations from last month, but bear with
me…there is plenty of room in the garden for both types of plantings.

So, here’s a little more information about panicle hydrangea. It is an upright, vase-shaped,
medium-sized shrub, reaching 5 to 10 feet in height (can be pruned into a small tree shape). It
grows quickly and has large inflorescences (may reach 12 to 18 inches long and 6 to 12 inches
wide) that start out white and change to purple-pink over the course of the flowering season
(mid-July through September). It prefers sun to partial shade and protection next to a structure is
ideal. However, it is one of the most cold-hardy hydrangeas available and is quite tolerant of
urban conditions.

Modern cultivars of panicle hydrangea offer wonderful features in such a gorgeous plant. Quick
Fire™ (‘Bulk’) flowers early (May to June), while ‘Tardiva’ flowers open later in September.
For pink flowers, look no further than Pinky Winky™ (‘DVPpink’), which has inflorescences
that appear two-toned as they open white and mature to a dark pink and ‘Pink Diamond’ which
has light pink flowers.

Some recent cultivars have lime-green inflorescences. These include Limelight™ and Little
Lime™ (‘Jane’), which is a more compact plant. Another compact cultivar is ‘Little Lamb’
which has white flowers. I must confess, however, that I’ve been more than a little infatuated
with Vanilla Strawberry™ (‘Renhy’), a new introduction from the First Editions® plant series
out of Bailey Nurseries. Its large inflorescences emerge a creamy vanilla white and mature
through soft pink and finally strawberry red at the base of the inflorescence. All of this color and
they are also supported by red stems. I’m in love and I have the perfect spot for one. Now if I
could only find the time to go buy it! Race you? (Cheryl Boyer)

**Contributors:** Cheryl Boyer, Nursery Crop Specialist; Ward Upham, Extension Associate

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