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Grass seed makes the difference

by Glenda Bosley

What is your lawn made of? This may have a lot to do with how it is growing.

Once the lawn is established there isn't much you can do about the soil underneath besides topdressing or starting again from scratch by removing all existing turf and improving the soil.

The grass seed used in the lawn will make a big difference to how it responds.

Fine Fescue is tolerant of shade, acidic and infertile soil. It does require well-drained soil. This grass will tolerate moderate foot traffic. The plant produces naturally occurring fungi called endophytes which provide resistance to insects. This is a relatively low maintenance turf. The quality of this turf will decline under high irrigation and nitrogen levels. Include 45 to 60 per cent in your seed mix.

Perennial Rye is a fast-sprouting seed and used as a nurse plant until other seed is established. It can be used on slopes where erosion may be a problem; on dry sites which cannot be irrigated; and when seeding at an unfavourable time of the season. The rapid germination and growth provides partial shade and protection for slower germinating seed. This is not a long-lived plant and will die out in a couple of years. It produces a shaggy lawn appearance shortly after mowing because of the fast growth rate, and the blade tips have a brownish, ragged appearance because of the tough fibrous leaf parts. Include no more than 20 per cent in your seed mix.

Turf-type Tall Fescue is used a lot in playgrounds because of its durability. It is used along roadsides and on slopes for erosion control. This plant grows well in compacted soil, tolerates drought, poor soil, heavy foot traffic and shade. There is good resistance to insects and disease. This grass forms thick clumps with very coarse stems. If you require a very tough grass include 60 per cent in your seed mix.

Bentgrass is a high-maintenance turf that is highly susceptible to insects and disease. This is used mainly on putting greens where it is mowed below 1" in height. This grass forms a very dense mat without rhizomes (underground stems) but has masses of above-ground creeping stolons which root at every node close to the ground. This plant has a very shallow root system and thrives in well-irrigated soil but becomes easily stressed in dry conditions. This grass can be injured by herbicides used to control broad-leaved weeds. It is not recommended for home lawns.

Kentucky Bluegrass grows best in full sun and well-drained soil. It is a high-maintenance grass, requiring more water and fertilizing.

This plant is very susceptible to insects and disease. Thatch can become a serious problem on poorly drained sites, especially if fertility levels are high and clippings are not removed. This is the most widely-used turfgrass in Ontario. Most sod farms grow this type of sod. Newer varieties have shown improved qualities such as Merion, Fylking and Nugget. It is best not to include more than 30 per cent in your seed mix.

The ideal soil for lawns is a loam soil. However it is usually too costly to make all the necessary improvements for an ideal soil. Most grass species will grow satisfactorily in a wide range of soils from clay to sandy loam. A clay soil can become compacted and poorly drained. Sandy soils have a poor water-holding capacity. A good lawn can be produced on less than suitable soil if it is properly managed (not over-watered) and not subject to excessive stress (such as low mowing and heavy foot traffic).

Adding organic matter to the soil improves the structure of heavy soils, provides better drainage, and water-holding capacity on light soils. Organic matter provides a food supply for soil micro-organisms, which also improves the soil structure.

An application of fertilizer high in phosphorous (the second number in the N-P-K of fertilizers) before seeding will ensure deep rooting of the grass.

Late summer and early fall, that is August and September, is the best time to seed a lawn. Spring seeding should be done as soon as the ground is workable. If the soil is too cold and too damp the germination will be slow and irregular. If you have a lot of weeds it is best to control them first before seeding.

Summer seeding is not recommended, but if you are able to keep the area moist until established it is possible.

The best seeding rate is three to five pounds per 1,000 square feet. A good seed mix may contain two to two-and-a-half million seeds per pound. Of course you can always sow your seed at a higher rate. After seeding, the soil should be lightly raked to cover the seed and then the area rolled to firm the soil around the seed and encourage rapid, uniform germination. The area should be kept moist until the seedlings are established.

Glenda Bosley operates Roots & Shoots Landscaping. "Beautiful Gardens Grown Nature's Way."