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Caring for the Newly Seeded Lawn

Late summer and early fall (August 20 through October 15) is the ideal time in Maryland for the establishment of cool season grasses such as turf-type tall fescue, fine fescue, and Kentucky bluegrass. If you cannot irrigate or if water restrictions are in effect, seeding between September 15 and October 15 may be preferable to take advantage of cooler temperatures and greater likelihood of rainfall. Seeding later than October 15 presents problems with the winter survival of turfgrass seedlings and with competition from winter annual broadleaf weeds. Seeding in the spring can present problems with competition from summer annual grass weeds such as crabgrass, and reduced survival of young turfgrass plants when summer heat and drought begins.

Although many people seed at the proper time, put much effort into proper soil preparation, and have selected quality seed or sod, some still find that the end product is not what they anticipated. Often, this failure is due to the initial lack of proper care after the seed has been sown.

Proper care during the first two months of establishment is essential to obtaining a healthy, dense turfgrass stand that is resistant to weed encroachment and other problems. Most of the necessary steps are based on common sense but are often overlooked by homeowners. By following the following basic guidelines, the chances for establishing an attractive lawn with reduced pest problems will be greatly enhanced.

- **Keep seedbed moist until turf has been mowed.**
- **Watch seedbed moisture carefully on days with low humidity, on windy days, and on sandy soils**
- **Mow new grass for the first time when it is 3/4 inch higher than the height it will be maintained.**

Irrigation

One of the most critical factors for successful establishment of new turfgrass seedings is maintaining adequate soil moisture until the turf is well established. Without moisture, germination and early seedling survival will be poor and may result in complete failure of the stand. The root system of young seedlings is shallow and not extensively developed. Thus, maintaining moisture in the upper inch of the soil is especially important.

The most likely times of the year to experience problems with excessive drying out of the soil surface are late spring and summer. However, although rainfall and desirable temperatures are less of a problem in the fall and in early to mid spring, soil can still easily dry out during these times of the year. The conditions most conducive to rapid drying of the soil surface include windy days, low humidity, high temperatures, sandy soils that retain little moisture, and compacted soils that inhibit water infiltration into the soil. A combination of these factors can result in rapid turf loss due to drought.

From the time of germination and for several weeks thereafter, the soil surface should be kept moist. When the conditions exist listed above that are conducive to rapid drying, several light waterings (1/16 to 1/4 inch water) a day may be needed to keep seedlings that have just emerged from dying. As the seedlings develop and their root systems increase, the surface may be allowed to dry out, but the root zone must still be kept moist. This may mean less frequent but somewhat more intensive irrigation. As the turf stand continues to develop to the point where mowing is required, the necessity for irrigation continues to decrease. The soil at this point should be firm enough to allow the use of a mower without its sinking into the turf. If the soil is too wet when the new turfgrass stand is first mowed, ruts may be created or grass plants may be pulled out.

Care must also be taken to not stop watering turfgrass mixtures too soon. Species that are quick to germinate and grow rapidly, such as perennial ryegrass and tall fescue, will

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establish quickly. Thus, reduction in watering may take place at an earlier date than slower germinating and growing grasses, such as Kentucky bluegrass. However, seed is often sold that contains several types of grass. If a seed mixture contains both quick and slow establishing types of grass, care must be taken to maintain adequate moisture until the slower growing grass becomes well established.

For areas where irrigation is impractical or impossible, it is essential that a good weed-free mulch be used to reduce loss of soil moisture. Even with a mulch, however, loss of some seedling turf should be expected during adverse environmental conditions if no water is applied. A subsequent overseeding of thin areas may then be necessary.

Although not usually a problem, excess water from either rainfall or irrigation can also lead to problems. The most common problems encountered are soil erosion, ponding of water which leads to suffocation or scalding of young grass, and disease problems in the late spring or summer months. Avoid watering past the point at which the water will infiltrate the soil and it starts to pond or to run off the site. This point will occur sooner on clay soils and compacted soils. Also, in the late spring and the summer, avoid watering during the night. Several seedling diseases that can kill entire stands of young grass are substantially worse when leaf blades remain wet throughout the night.

Mowing

Poor mowing practices are a primary cause for the decline of home lawns, and are just as important for a young lawn as for an established lawn. The basic practices are virtually the same. First, it is especially important that a sharp blade be used so that sensitive seedlings are not shredded or pulled out. Second, do not mow if the air temperatures are over 90° F. It can cause damage to seedlings. Third, mow the new turf when the grass is no more than 1/3 higher than the height you plan to cut. Thus, if the mower is set for 2 ½ inches, mow the grass before it gets no higher than about 3 ¼ inches. Do not mow the grass too short. Grasses such as turf-type tall fescue, fine fescue, and Kentucky bluegrass should be mowed no lower than 2 inches, and preferably 2 ½ to 3 inches. Low mowing heights will allow many weeds to get a foothold in a young

grass stand. Finally, do not mow unless the soil is sufficiently firm to support the mower.

Fertilization

Soil tests should have been obtained from a local county extension office prior to seeding so that the proper amounts of limestone and fertilizer were applied to the seedbed. If these recommendations were followed, no additional fertilizer should be needed for 1 ½ to 2 months after seeding. At this point, normal maintenance fertilizer recommendations can be followed as described in the University of Maryland Home Garden Information Center Fact Sheet 702 “Lawns and the Chesapeake Bay”. However, If no fertilizer was applied prior to seeding, apply 10 pounds of a 10-10-10 fertilizer per 1000 sq. feet as soon as possible. After that application, wait 1 ½ to 2 months, and then follow recommendations in the Home Garden Information Center Fact Sheet 702.

Weed Control

Weed control in newly seeded turf may become necessary if competition is severe. Under some conditions, weeds are so aggressive that the grass never has a chance to establish and the area will have to be reseeded. Weeds are more likely to be a problem in spring seedings and mid to late fall seedings. If weeds are so extensive that hand pulling is not practical, use of herbicides may be warranted. Generally, it is most feasible to apply broadleaf weed herbicides after new turf has been mowed 2 to 3 times. Control of annual grasses is more difficult. As herbicides labeled for these uses change frequently, it is best to consult the following weed control publications for information on products that may be used on young lawns:

- University of MD Agronomy Mimeo # 79 – “Broadleaf Weed Control in Established Lawns”
- University of MD Agronomy Mimeo # 85 – “Herbicides for Crabgrass and Goosegrass Control in Turf”.

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