



## GARDEN KNOW HOW No. 5

# How to seed a new lawn

From the editors  
of Garden Making



# Everything you need to know about growing a new lawn from seed

*By Judith Adam*



# How to seed a new lawn

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### From Beckie

Not all new lawns begin with rolls of sod. Thick, green grass can be started from seed, too. In addition to saving money, another benefit to a seed-sown lawn is the ability to select a mixture customized for your particular site and climate.

The secret to success is preparing the site and choosing the right seed. After seeding, it's just a matter of careful watering and feeding. Before long, you'll be running barefoot through the soft, green blades of grass in your backyard.

Beckie Fox, Editor-in-Chief



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Usually the most effective groundcover for the open area in the middle of your garden is a lawn. A healthy lawn is packed tight with turfgrasses that shoulder out other opportunistic plants, like weeds and invasive perennials. But for a lawn to aggressively fill the space, the grass must be adaptable to your specific conditions. In other words, you need a custom lawn that can cope with what might be chronically dry soil, shade from trees, or rough-and-tumble foot traffic.

Laying down sod is quick, efficient, expensive and immediately satisfying. But sod is most often grown with just one type of grass, usually a hybrid Kentucky bluegrass. It's beautiful but fussy, gobbling up fertilizer and requiring

consistent irrigation through the growing season. It's a high-maintenance turf that might not like your less-than-perfect circumstances. To get a custom lawn, you've got to plant it from seed.





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## Clear the site

Grass seeds germinate best in the cool, moist conditions of spring or autumn, when air temperature is between 16 and 24°C. The greater part of the work is preparing the site, but this also needs to be done if laying sod, so it can't be avoided. Good preparation results in a lawn that leaps into action, thickly filling the space.

Grass plants require six to eight inches (15 to 20 cm) of good soil in their root zone. Remove all plants, weeds and grasses, including their roots. If an older, patchy lawn is in place, remove it, too. For a small area,

use a spade to slide horizontally under the turf and lift it out in sections. If the area is large, a turf-stripping machine (rented from an equipment-supply shop) will do the work quickly, and is no more difficult to operate than a large power mower.

Once the site is cleared of all plants, use a stiff rake to work over the soil, breaking compacted clods of earth and gathering up stray bits of roots, stones and pebbles. With the soil cleared of debris, this is your opportunity to make improvements before the new lawn covers the area.





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## Prep for planting day

If the soil is a good clay loam that drains well, spread a two-inch (5-cm) layer of topsoil, triple mix (topsoil, peat moss and composted manure) or fine garden compost across the area to make a bed for the seeds.

If the area has compacted soil, use a garden fork to loosen (but not turn over) the soil every six inches (15 cm) until the entire area has been worked. This will begin to open spaces to deeper levels, allowing organic materials and oxygen to penetrate. Spread a one-inch (5-cm)

layer of coarse builder's sand over the area to fall into cracks and help improve drainage. Settle the soil and sand with a stiff rake, removing root debris and stones, breaking up clods and raking to a fine tilth. Finish by spreading a two-inch (10-cm) layer of topsoil, triple mix or fine garden compost, using the back of the stiff rake to smooth the surface.

If you have sandy soil that is chronically dry, spread a four-inch (10-cm) layer of topsoil or triple mix, omitting the coarse sand (you already have that).





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## Sow the seed

Select seed suited to your site. (See “Selecting a Lawn Seed Mix,” page 8.) Consider if you will be using a seed spreader or broadcast the seed by hand. Large areas are easier to cover by walking back and forth with a broadcast or drop spreader (use the lowest setting); spread seed by walking in one direction, then spread again, walking at a 90-degree angle to the original direction. For smaller areas, broadcast the seed by hand, taking care to sprinkle seeds evenly and not throw them in broad bands.

Once the seed has been spread, lightly tamp it down to ensure it has good contact with the soil. A lawn roller can be used, as can the leaf rake again, but turn it over so the back of the rake is resting almost horizontally on the soil. Pass the back of the leaf rake across the area, gently pressing the seeds into their soil bed.

Cover the seeds lightly with one inch (2.5 cm) of peat moss or one-half inch (1 cm) of topsoil to keep moisture around each seed and prevent drying out while waiting for germination. Take care to cover the edges of the seeded area.





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## Watering and feeding

Irrigate each day with an oscillating lawn sprinkler (15 minutes is sufficient), or a hand-held fan nozzle on your hose—the droplets must be fine and gentle to avoid displacing the seeds. Water in the morning or early evening when there is less wind. Within two weeks, you should see the first green grass blades of your seed mix; it will take longer if you've sown Kentucky bluegrass exclusively.

Don't allow people or pets to walk on the seeded grass. Cut the grass when it reaches three to four inches (8 to 10 cm), and be sure the mower blades are sharp, making clean cuts and not ripping the seedlings out. If there are thin spots where seeds were unevenly distributed, correct this with a bit of overseeding, keeping the seeds covered with peat moss and watered until germination.

Six weeks after germination, deliver a slow-release lawn fertilizer with a nutrient analysis similar to 21-6-12 to encourage the new seedlings to grow husky and thick. Overseed the lawn again in late summer, about the end of August, to add more grass plants and thicken the lawn more rapidly. Spread the seeds and cover with peat moss, then keep them moist until they germinate in early September. By mid-October, it will be time to fertilize again with a nutrient analysis similar to 6-8-14. This will help to keep weeds from gaining a stand in the new lawn.

Overseeding once or twice annually for the first two years will ensure the lawn is thick enough to discourage weed invasion—there won't be room for anything but healthy grass plants.





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## Selecting a lawn seed mix

Lawn seed is sold in premixed combinations for specific light conditions, either sunny or shady, incorporating different kinds of turfgrasses that work together to create a lawn. Measure your site to determine the approximate number of square feet you need to cover. The grass mix bag will tell you how large an area its contents will cover, and you can determine how many bags are required for your new lawn.

Additional information on the seed bag is important, and will tell you the characteristics of the seed, and help you select a mix that suits your growing conditions. A typical combination includes Kentucky bluegrass, a perennial ryegrass and a fescue, with different percentages of each indicated on the bag. (These grasses are also sold individually, which allows

you to make your own custom mix, if desired.) You might also notice bags of “quick” seed sold for patching bald spots in lawns, and this is usually perennial ryegrass, because it germinates and establishes rapidly. Depending on how many spots you have to patch, purchase what seems an adequate amount to be put down in handfuls, rather than raking it over a large area.

A deluxe blend will have more Kentucky bluegrass (for colour and soft texture) than will an all-purpose mix. The latter will have more fescue for a durable turf. Quick-establishing grass mixes will have a high percentage of perennial ryegrass, for filling in thin lawns with bare spots. A shade mix will have more fescues for areas that receive little direct sunlight. *(Continued on next page.)*





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## Selecting a lawn seed mix

If a fine-textured, low-maintenance lawn is desired, a shade grass mix would be a good choice for any light conditions. Shade mixes, with their high content of hybrid fescue grasses, are winter hardy, require minimal irrigation and fertilizer, and will grow in either sun or shade.

Seed companies also produce turfgrass mixes for seriously problematic growing conditions, such as athletic fields, and road verges contaminated by sodium chloride and calcium chloride, used to melt ice. Most lawn turfgrasses will desiccate and die in those circumstances, allowing more salt-tolerant weeds to invade. Mixes of hybrid salt-tolerant grasses will better withstand the sodium from winter ice clearing. Specialty grasses can be found on the websites of turf seed companies.

Grass seed sold as ecological lawns, or no-mow lawns, are mixes of fescue species that will form a shaggy turf with a maximum height of six inches (15 cm) that can be mowed infrequently. They are drought resistant, but may require fertilizer. No-mow or eco-lawns are rough-textured and work well in country or cottage settings, or in casual-style urban settings.

By understanding the performance characteristics of individual grass selections (and Dutch white clover, an important companion plant for lawn grasses), you can select a turfgrass mix to suit your particular growing circumstances. Or, if you have an established lawn that performs poorly, you can overseed with a specific kind of grass that will strengthen and improve your current lawn.





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## Which grass is for you?

**KENTUCKY BLUEGRASS** produces fine-textured, deep blue-green blades for lawns and golf greens. It has a spreading root system, is winter hardy and disease resistant. It tolerates moderate foot traffic, but doesn't stand up to athletic activity. Kentucky bluegrass doesn't tolerate shade, is slow to germinate (up to 30 days), requires regular irrigation and needs feeding more than once in a growing season; it has poor resistance to chinch bugs.

**FESCUES** are finely textured grasses that include chewing fescue, tall and creeping red fescue, hard fescue and sheep's fescue. They are shade tolerant (but will also grow in sun) and winter hardy, have a spreading root system, blend well with bluegrass, are resistant to chinch bugs, and require less water and fertilizer. Fescue is slow to germinate (up to 21 days) and doesn't withstand heavy foot traffic.

**PERENNIAL RYEGRASS** has a medium texture and dark green blade colour. It blends well with bluegrass and fescues, and withstands foot traffic and athletic games. It has good disease resistance, is resistant to chinch bugs, but is less winter hardy than bluegrass and fescue. Perennial ryegrass doesn't tolerate shade, and requires regular irrigation and fertilizing. It germinates quickly (within seven days), and is a bunch-forming grass that doesn't spread.

**ANNUAL RYEGRASS** (which lives only one year) is coarse-textured and used as a nurse grass for other grass species. It germinates quickly (five to 10 days) and keeps weeds out while finer turfgrasses get established.

*(Continued on next page.)*





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## Which grass is for you?

### ENDOPHYTE-ENHANCED GRASSES

contain a naturally occurring fungus that prevents insects, such as chinch bugs, from feeding on stems and blades of grass plants. (It doesn't protect grass roots that grubs feed on.) Many selections of perennial ryegrass and fescue are endophyte-enhanced (and it will be indicated on the seed package). Endophytes won't harm pets that occasionally munch on grass, but grazing cattle will be sickened by it.

**DUTCH WHITE CLOVER** (*Trifolium repens*) is a low-growing companion plant for mixing into grass lawns. It germinates best in cool, wet conditions in spring, and can be overseeded into established lawns by

hand broadcasting (unlike grass seed, it doesn't require covering with peat moss). Clover isn't included in packaged grass mixes, and must be purchased separately from seed companies, or it can be found in garden centres that stock grass seed. Clover is a legume and fixes nitrogen from air, making its own fertilizer. It's drought hardy, germinates in five to 10 days and remains green when grasses become temporarily brown in dry soil. It's a spreading plant, and once introduced in a lawn, it will be permanent. If you decide to add it to your grass seed, the clover seed should be about five per cent of the total seed mix. It's also acceptable to add a greater proportion of clover seed if you prefer it to have more profile in your new lawn.





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## Outsmart hairy chinch bugs

Hairy chinch bugs are unwelcome guests in lawns. They thrive in hot, dry weather, feeding on grass plants by sucking juices from the blades. Their damage shows as irregular, sunken dead patches that can spread to encompass large areas. Dry soil encourages chinch bugs, so discourage them by keeping the lawn moist; water deeply for one to two hours (in one session) each week during summer.

Hybrid turf cultivars that contain endophytic fungi (called endophyte-en-

hanced grasses) are resistant to chinch bugs. The resistant grass may not eliminate chinch bugs, but the damage will be less severe. If you notice irregular dead patches in the lawn, the best time to check for chinch bugs is the second week of July. Thrust a large tin can (with both ends removed) into healthy turf next to the damaged areas. Fill the can with water and watch for one-third-inch (4-mm)-long bugs with wings folded across their backs, floating to the surface.



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