HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

REPLANTING THE LAWN

If you are thinking about replanting your lawn, spring is the time to do it. Whether it is planting St. Augustine sod or seeding a Bahiagrass lawn, the warm weather will help the lawns to grow and become established at a quicker rate.

However, before planting your lawn, you need to select the turf grass that is best for your situation. Selecting which type of grass for your lawn should be based on a number of factors, including site conditions, level of maintenance and, of course, personal preference. Cost is another factor that may be considered, but it should not be the main factor.

St. Augustine and Bahiagrass are the two most popular warm season turf grasses. Both have advantages and disadvantages.

St. Augustine grass lawns consist of a green to blue-green dense turf that is well-adapted to most soils and climatic regions in Florida. It establishes quickly from sod, which creates an "instant lawn" many homeowners desire. It also can be established by 2-inch plugs that are placed about 1 foot apart. This option, of course, will take longer to grow into a full lawn. Establishment of St. Augustine grass by seed is not practiced, as the success rate is very poor and seed is rarely available.

Like most turf grasses, St. Augustine grass has certain cultural and pest problems. It does not remain green during drought without supplemental irrigation. It produces excessive thatch (a layer of organic matter between the soil and turf) under moderate to high fertility and frequent irrigation. It also tolerates wear poorly, making constant activity on the lawn damaging. The major insect pest of St. Augustine grass is the chinch bug.

Bahiagrass forms an extensive root system, which makes it one of the most drought-tolerant grasses. It performs well in infertile, sandy soils and does not require a lot of fertilizer. It does not form excessive thatch. It may be grown from seed, which is abundant and relatively cheap, or it may be established from sod, sprigs or plugs.

It has relatively few disease problems, and mole crickets are the only primary insect problem. But Bahiagrass also has disadvantages. It forms tall seedheads throughout the spring, summer and fall. This necessitates mowing on a regular schedule. Because the seed stems are tough, it also makes it more difficult to mow than some grass species. It does not have good tolerance to shade, traffic or salt water.

Bahiagrass also displays an open growth habit, which can result in encroachment of weeds into sparse areas. It has a coarse leaf texture and provides less cushioning for recreation.

Regardless of which type of turf you choose or the method of planting (seed, sod or plugs), it is essential that the planting site be properly prepared before planting, including removal of all plants and roots in the area. A healthy lawn cannot be established if laid on top of the previous turf grass. Also, remember that a healthy, attractive, long-lived lawn can only be established if you select high-quality seed or planting material and select turf grasses that are well-adapted to the site conditions.

Watch out for problem areas where turf has trouble growing. These areas are usually deeply shaded or consist of large amounts of tree roots. Even shade-tolerant turf varieties require at least four hours of sunlight daily. Areas under large trees where turf receives no sunlight and has to compete with the tree roots for water and nutrients can be a problem. They should be mulched or planted with plants that can adapt, such as ivy or bromeliads. It's a waste of time and money to try to grow turf in these areas.

Proper irrigation is essential for the establishment of the lawn. Too much or too little water during this
time can be a huge factor in the long-term health of the turf. Shallow, frequent watering is needed until the
turf is established.

For more information on how to water during establishment, or about lawn care in general, contact
Osceola County Master Gardeners at 321-697-3000. They are available from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday
through Friday.

See this article for more information on selecting grasses from the UF/IFAS EDIS Database:
Selection and Adaptability of Grasses

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