HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

ESTABLISHING A 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 Bahia lawn, the warm weather will help the lawns to grow and establish themselves at a quicker rate. However, before planting your lawn, you need to select the turfgrass that is best for your situation.

Selecting which type of turfgrass for your lawn should be based on a number of factors including site conditions, level of maintenance, and, of course, personal preference. Although, cost is another factor that may be considered, it should not be the main factor in your decision. St. Augustinegrass (Stenotaphrum secundatum) and Bahiagrass (Paspalum notatum) are the two most popular warm season turfgrasses, however Zoysiagrass (Zoysia spp.) is a newer species in town that should also be considered. All turfgrasses have their advantages and disadvantages. You need a close look at these in order to make a complete, educated decision.

St. Augustinegrass lawns consist of a green to blue-green dense turf that is well adapted to most soils and climatic regions in Florida. It has relatively good salt tolerance and certain cultivars possess good shade tolerance. It establishes quickly from sod, which creates an “instant lawn” many homeowners desire.

Like most turfgrasses, St. Augustinegrass has certain cultural and pest problems. It does not remain green during drought conditions without supplemental irrigation. It produces excessive thatch (layer of organic matter between the soil and turf) under moderate to high fertility and frequent irrigation. It also has poor wear tolerance, making constant activity on the lawn damaging. The major insect pest of St. Augustinegrass is the chinch bug. Some cultivars are also susceptible to gray leaf spot and other diseases.

Bahiagrass forms an extensive root system, which makes it one of our most drought-tolerant grasses. It performs well in infertile, sandy soils and does not require high inputs of fertilizers. It does not form excessive thatch. You may grow it from seed, which is abundant and relatively cheap, or you may establish from sod, sprigs, or plugs. It has relatively few disease problems, and mole crickets are the only primary insect problem.

But Bahiagrass also has its disadvantages. It forms tall seedheads throughout the spring, summer, and fall months. This necessitates mowing on a regular schedule. Because the seed stems are tough, it also makes it more difficult to mow than some other grass species. It does not have good tolerance to shade, traffic, or saltwater. 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 recreational activities.

Zoysiagrass has a finer leaf blade than St. Augustinegrass and is adapted to a variety of soils. It has a good tolerance to shade, salt, and traffic, as well as provides an extremely dense sod that resists weed invasion.
The biggest disadvantage of Zoysiagrass is that it can be slow to establish. However, once established, the slow growth is an advantage it reduces mowing frequency. Other disadvantages of the older varieties include slow recovery from damage, poor growth on compacted soils, high fertility requirements, and poor drought tolerance. It also needs to be mowed much shorter (height of 2 inches) than St. Augustinegrass and Bahiagrass. But, when properly maintained, Zoysiagrass makes an excellent turf. Today, the most popular variety of Zoysiagrass is “Empire”.

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, which includes removing all plant material and roots in the area. Establishing a healthy lawn if laid on top of the previous turfgrass is impossible. Also, remember that you can only establish a healthy, attractive, long-lived lawn if you select high quality seed or planting material and select turfgrasses that are well adapted to the site conditions. This includes watching out for problem areas.

Problem areas are where turf has trouble growing and should be substituted for mulch or another type of plant material. These areas are usually deeply shaded and/or consist of large amounts of tree roots. Even shade tolerant turf varieties require at least 4 hours of sunlight every day. Therefore, areas under large trees where turf receives no sunlight and has to compete with the tree roots for water and nutrients is considered a problem area. These areas should be mulched or planted with plants that can adapt to the area such as ivy or bromeliads. It’s a waste of time and money to try to grow turf in these areas.

Once planted, 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 waterings is needed until the turf is established. For more information on how to water during establishment or general lawn care, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to Monday thru Friday from 10am to 2pm.

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