



How To Establish, Renovate, or Overseed Your Lawn

Another Report on Effective Turf Maintenance from the Lawn Institute

There are three basic methods commonly used for the establishment of turfgrass: by seed, by sod, or by sprigs. Regardless of the method, the preparation of the soil is the same. Make a soil test to determine the fertilizer (nutrient) requirements and the rate of application needed.

Ten Steps to Establishing a Healthy New Lawn

Follow these establishment steps for starting a successful lawn.

Step 1. Test The Soil - This is the best way to determine what nutrients your soil needs and the amounts it needs to provide the best start for a new lawn. The test also shows if the soil pH (acidity/alkalinity) needs adjusting.

Most lawn and garden centers, nurseries, or hardware stores have soil testing kits. In most areas, there are also private testing firms or local County Extension offices that may offer testing and information.

Step 2. Control Weeds - Most annual weeds can be controlled by tilling the soil. A potential problem is the perennial weeds that are capable of regrowing, even though the top parts may have been removed. A post-emergent herbicide should be used several days before tilling the soil.

Step 3. Prepare The Soil - Your soil test results will indicate the fertilizer analysis needed and at what rate. In the absence of a soil test, a fertilizer high in phosphorus should be initially applied at a rate of 2 to 3 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft. Also, apply any additional materials recommended for soil pH adjustment.

Step 4. Till The Soil - Tilling does several things. It works the fertilizer and the pH control materials into the soil. It helps the new grass roots grow into the soil and it makes the soil easier to smooth out and make level. Till the soil to a depth of 4 to 6 inches.

Step 5. Rake - Use a garden-type rake to remove any rocks and debris that the tiller has brought to the surface. This also is the last chance to work on contouring and low spots.

Step 6. Apply Seed, Sod, Or Sprigs - Buy the best quality turfgrass sod or seed available of improved varieties recommended for your area as a single variety, mixture, or blend. Seed purity and germination percentages should be high, only a small percentage of non-perennial grasses should be present, and no noxious weeds should be named on the seed label.

When seeding, sow the recommended pounds per 1,000 sq. ft. uniformly across the lawn area, using 1/2 the amount in two directions at right angles, to help ensure good coverage. After seeding, lightly rake the seed into the soil, but not too deep. Next, use a roller to firm the soil surface, which will help germination.

If the lawn is sodded, lay the sod in a brick-like pattern. Run the strips lengthwise across the face of any slope areas. Make sure the sod pieces are tightly butted to each other. As with seeding, use a roller to make sure the sod is in good contact with the soil.

Sprigs should be evenly spread across the lawn area by hand or by equipment designed for this purpose. After planting, the sprigs can be top-dressed by adding a thin layer of soil. The roller should be used after top-dressing to give the sprigs good contact with the soil.

Step 7. Water - The newly seeded or sprigged lawn must be kept moist, NOT saturated, until the seeds or sprigs begin to grow. As they start to grow and establish a root system, reduce the frequency of watering. Too much water promotes poor germination and seedling disease. As you reduce the frequency of watering, increase the amount applied each time. In about 4 to 6 weeks after planting, the lawn should be treated as an established lawn. Then, water infrequently, applying 1 inch when the soil is dry 4 to 6 inches deep.

Watering a newly sodded lawn is different from seeds or sprigs. That sod must be soaked heavily to the point that the soil is completely wetted under the sod. This should be done every day for the first 1 to 2 weeks, until the roots are established in the new soil. After this period, treat the sod as an established lawn.

Step 8. Mow - As the new lawn grows, it will be necessary to mow. Set the mower for the recommended height of your grass variety. When the grass has grown about 1/3 higher than the recommended mowing height, it's time to mow. Always mow when the grass is dry. The more often a newly seeded or sprigged lawn is mowed, the faster it tends to fill in and thicken. For recommended mowing heights, refer to the 4th brochure in this series, *Home Lawn Care Programs That Work*.

Step 9. Fertilize - When the seeded lawn is 6 to 8 weeks old, it's time for the first application of fertilizer. If the soil test didn't recommend a fertilizer for an established lawn, one with an N-P-K ration of 3-1-2 will do a good job. Examples are 15-5-10, 12-4-8, 18-6-12. Apply at the manufacturer's recommended rate. Sodded lawns will not

require fertilizer for at least the first season.

Step 10. Control Weeds - All newly seeded lawns will have unwanted weeds, most of which came from the soil. Annual weeds should be controlled by mowing. Hopefully, any perennial weeds were controlled with the post-emergent herbicide used in Step 2. Herbicides are not usually recommended the first year of a new lawn. A little hand weed control may be necessary. Sodded lawns should not require weed control chemicals.

Renovating and Overseeding

Usually lawns with less than 50% weeds can be renovated and overseeded without tearing it up and starting all over. The best time of the year for these procedures is early spring or fall. The following steps are recommended:

Step 1. Remove Thatch And Weeds - After closely mowing your lawn, use a power rake or verti-cutter to remove thatch and weeds. Usually, this requires several passes over the area in different directions. Rake off the debris so that the soil surface is exposed between grasses that are left.

Step 2. Apply Fertilizer And Other Nutrients - A soil test will help determine what is needed. In the absence of a soil test, use a slow-release fertilizer with an N-P-K ratio of 3-1-2. Limestone also may be needed to correct soil acidity. Set the power rake or verti-cutter so as to cut only slightly into the soil surface, then work the fertilizer and other nutrients into the soil.

Step 3. Apply Seed - Select a blend or mixture of named, improved varieties of lawn grasses. We cannot overemphasize the importance of renovating and overseeding with modern, improved grasses that are insect and disease resistant, and have stress tolerances and sufficient vigor to crowd out weeds. Using these improved varieties will cost less to maintain when you follow proper mowing, watering and fertilizing practices.

Use a machine called a slit seeder to sow the seed into the lawn. All of the machinery mentioned above can be found at an outdoor equipment rental store. If this seems like more work than you want, contract with a professional landscape or lawn care company.

Step 4. Add Water - Like the establishment of a new seeded lawn, renovated or overseeded lawns need to be kept moist, but not soaked, until the new seeds begin to grow and develop a root system. In 4 to 6 weeks, treat it as a reestablished lawn.

Note: Grasses that spread by runners can be plugged into an existing lawn that needs renovation. These include bermudagrass, St. Augustine, zoysiagrass, and buffalograss.

With over 50% of the lawns in North America more than 7 years old, most could benefit from renovation and the planting of the new turfgrass varieties that are more resistant to insects and disease, and more tolerant of drought than common older varieties. As an added bonus, the new grass varieties generally mean the need for less pesticides and water to have a healthy, nice looking lawn.

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