Friday’s Feature
By
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Bahiagrass for drought-tolerant lawns

This week’s article is written by guest columnist, Roger Elliott, 4-H/livestock agent for University of Florida/Escambia County Cooperative Extension Service.

Many homeowners are searching for a low maintenance lawn grass. One grass species that may fit this situation is Bahiagrass (*Paspalum notatum*), which is native to Brazil. Mr. Ed Finlayson, a former County Agent in Pensacola, first discovered a variety of Bahiagrass growing in sandy soil in Escambia County. It was propagated and named “Pensacola Bahiagrass” in 1935. This variety was first grown for seed at the Langley Bell 4-H Center in Pensacola.

Bahiagrass is adapted to the sandy, nutrient-deficient soils of the southeast. It has proved to be very drought-resistant due to its deep and extensive root system. Once established, bahiagrass can survive without irrigation and does not form excessive thatch. After a severe drought, the grass rebounds quickly with subsequent rain or irrigation. It requires little supplemental fertilizer and is easily established via seed or sod, both of which are readily available. There are few disease problems and the insect pests, notably mole crickets, can be successfully managed. Iron deficiencies can be overcome by using a fertilizer that contains iron.

The most obvious disadvantage to Bahiagrass is the unsightly seedheads that stand erect in the lawn. The seedheads and the grass itself are tough and tend to dull mower blades quickly. Bahiagrass does not grow well in dense shade or stand up under heavy foot traffic. The leaves tend to yellow due to iron deficiencies.

Plant bahiagrass in spring or early summer for best results. However, successful plantings have occurred as late as August and September. Late plantings tend to do better in years with droughty springs unless irrigated. Except during establishment or severe drought, our summer thundershowers will take care of most of the watering. During drought, Bahiagrass will often go dormant and turn brown. It will quickly recover once rain returns.

Soil tests should be done prior to establishment and then annually. Your County Extension office has kits available to mail in soil samples to the Soil Testing Lab in Gainesville for a nominal fee. General fertilizer recommendations for bahiagrass lawns are limited to two to four applications from spring through fall. Do
not apply more than \( \frac{1}{2} \) of water-soluble nitrogen per 1000 square feet at any one time unless at least 50\% of that nitrogen is in a slow release form.

Seeds from several Bahiagrass cultivars are available. The most recommended variety for lawns is the Argentine Bahiagrass due to its dark green color, dense growth habit, and generally fewer seedheads once established. Argentine Bahiagrass is an improved cultivar from the original Pensacola Bahiagrass.

Bahiagrass should be mown to a height of 3-4 inches to promote a deeper, more extensive root system that allows the grass to better withstand drought stress. Mowing should never remove more than 1/3 of the height of the leaf blades. Bahiagrass does not grow extremely tall, but the seedheads often dictate the frequency of mowing.

If it fits your situation, you might want to consider Bahiagrass as an earth-friendly, water conserving, limited-maintenance choice for your lawn. It is a tough grass that can handle our sometimes harsh climate and especially our periodic drought conditions. For more information on all types of lawn issues, contact your local County Extension office.

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