Friday’s Feature
By
Theresa Friday
October 12, 2008

Plan now for a green winter lawn

Fall has arrived and our lawns are slowing down. In a few more weeks a frost will put warm season turf species, like centipede and St. Augustine, into winter dormancy. To some homeowners, the thought of a brown lawn is not very appealing, and they look for ways to keep it green all winter.

One way to have green grass during the winter is to overseed. In overseeding, a temporary cool-season grass, like ryegrass, is seeded into the permanent lawn. Grasses used for overseeding will die out in the spring, when the warm-season grass comes out of dormancy. In making a decision to overseed your lawn, or not, weigh the advantages and disadvantages.

Overseeding your warm season lawn with cool season grasses can actually delay next spring’s green-up of the permanent lawn and may even weaken it. Just keep in mind that cool season turf species thrive at temperatures in the 60-70 degree F range, so next spring when your permanent lawn begins to break dormancy, the overseeded turf species will be very competitive and act similar to any other weeds competing for nutrients, water, and space. On the plus side, the temporary lawn could prevent erosion problems, prevent mud tracking into the home, and would provide the aesthetics of a beautiful green lawn all winter.

Since overseeding is mostly done for cosmetic reasons, many gardeners don’t do it. They like to take a break from routine lawn care.

However, if you overseed, the turf species of preference is ryegrass. Ryegrasses (annual or perennial) are popular because they germinate quickly, are fast growers, tolerate sun or shade and can be found at a reasonable low cost.

Ryegrass, seeded heavily and mowed closely, can provide a dense and beautiful lawn throughout the winter. Seeding rate for home lawns with ryegrass should be about 10 pounds of seed per thousand square feet. Seeding should be done when soil temperatures reach around 70 degrees F which, as a general rule, will occur around the middle of October to early November in Northwest Florida.
Proper preparation and proper watering are important for success. Overseeded grass must contact the soil. First, the lawn should be thoroughly raked to remove all debris. Next, mow the lawn closely, to about a 2½ to 3 inch height. Here’s one case when you may want to catch the clippings, or rake up the grass after mowing. The lawn may need to be cut more than once to reduce it to the desired height.

Cultural practices of mowing, fertilizing, watering, and pest management must continue throughout the winter for an overseeded lawn.

Mowing should begin when the overseeded grass is tall enough to be cut (around 1 - 2 inches above the permanent grass). Properly fertilized ryegrass grows very quickly, so weekly mowing will probably be required. Do not mow with a dull blade--the seedlings may be torn from the ground or have a ragged appearance. Water as needed to keep the grass from wilting and fertilize to keep the ryegrass growing vigorously and to maintain a deep green color. To help prevent root burn, the first fertilizer application should follow the second mowing.

In the spring, when your permanent grass is coming out of dormancy, you will need to discourage the ryegrass by stopping the fertilization in February. Water as infrequently as possible, making sure the permanent lawngrass does not suffer excessively. But, continue to mow the ryegrass as closely as possible each week. These practices tend to weaken the winter grass and facilitate a faster transition back to the permanent lawngrass. Once the permanent lawngrass has resumed growth, begin your regular lawn maintenance program.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: http://santarosa.ifas.ufl.edu.

###