

Bermuda & Rye Grasses – Transitioning to Summer

While the subject of turf grass in Arizona may be something of an oxymoron to those that have been here awhile, the presence of so many top quality golf courses says something for the viability of lawns in the desert. If you are one of those intrepid souls who just has to have a lawn in an environment that is better known for thirty foot cactus and frying eggs on sidewalks, pay attention and you may just pick up some tips to pull it off. On the other hand, if you are with the vast majority of us who sold the lawn mower at the garage sale before moving west, listen up and you may find vindication in these paragraphs.

Many turf grasses do quite well here, but I'm going to focus on the two that are most prevalent; bermuda grass and rye grass. The former is dominant (read green) in the summer and the latter is dominant in the winter. The end of Spring is a crucial time for overseeded lawns in our area. If you had green grass during the months from November to March you most likely have a lawn that consists of a bermuda base that was overseeded with rye grass. The rye is what you have been mowing all winter.

“Transition” refers to the period when rye grass dies back and Bermuda takes over. Driven by the warmer nighttime temperatures, the rye will give way to the more robust bermuda which has lain dormant all winter. As good managers of turf, we want to hasten this process. What follows is a four-step process to a smooth summer transition. Each of the following steps is designed to weaken the rye grass to the point that it actually dies out and no longer shades the Bermuda lying beneath.

- 1) Do not fertilize! Wait until we get well into bermuda season before feeding your lawn.
- 2) Resist over-watering. Many golf courses actually turn the water off for a few weeks to stress the rye.
- 3) Lower the mower height. It is not necessary to “scalp” into the bermuda but, again, we want to stress the rye.
- 4) Finally, a light verticutting towards the end of this process will help thin out the rye canopy allowing the bermuda more light.

This process may take as long as four weeks, depending on temperatures and available light. Rye can be especially troublesome with shady lawns, sometimes lasting well into August before it dies out completely. Then, often, it leaves behind unsightly bare patches where the bermuda has been crowded out.

Once your lawn is through transition you can fertilize the bermuda heavily to push growth and fill in the thin spots. And, oh yes, get ready to spend at least one afternoon a week behind one of those contraptions the rest of us left back in our other life. I love the smell of new mown grass...especially if it is my neighbors!