

Over Seeding

October is the time of year for pumpkins, cool nights and overseeding your Bermuda grass lawns to Rye grass. Overseeding is a Southwestern ritual for all those transplanted Midwesterners who want a green lawn all winter. Bermuda tends to go dormant when nighttime temperatures drop below 60 degrees for an extended period of time, hence the desire to change to a cool season Rye grass. To follow is a step-by-step description on the how-tos of overseeding and, hopefully, a beautiful, green winter lawn.

Step number one is to fertilize your Bermuda with a high potassium fertilizer. The numbers on the bag should read 0-0-50 or something similar. You do NOT want to use anything with nitrogen in it at this stage, so a 10-0-50 would be a no-no.

Next, tune-up your irrigation system by making sure all heads work and give good coverage. Sufficient irrigation is especially important during the grow-in stage. A few weeks following the application of the 0-0-50, and at least two weeks before overseeding turf, turn the water to the lawn off entirely. You will want a dry lawn to proceed to the next step, which is called de-thatching.

De-thatching is the process of preparing the Bermuda to receive the Rye grass seed. Unless you happen to have one, you will need to rent a motorized de-thatcher or verticutter from one of the local equipment rental companies. Be sure to get a lesson from the supplier on the proper safety and handling of the machine.

De-thatching will generate a lot of debris (as much as a 50-gallon trash can for every 20 square feet in some cases,) so be ready for a long day. The idea is to remove as much of the top growth and dead “thatch” from the Bermuda as possible so you will have good seed-to-ground contact for the Rye seed.

Once de-thatching is done, the fun part begins. Now you can put down the perennial Rye grass seed. Avoid annual Rye, as it creates a very coarse and unreliable surface. Perennial Rye grass should be broadcast over your newly prepared surface at the rate of 10-15 lbs per 1000 square feet. A slow release fertilizer rich in phosphorus, such as 10-30-10, could be applied at this time or after the first mowing. Be careful to put the seed and fertilizer only on the lawn and not in the surrounding gravel. (There is some sort of cosmic law that the seed applied outside of your lawn will be the healthiest!)

The final step can be the most difficult and crucial to the eventual outcome. The seed needs to be kept moist for about two weeks or more, depending on temperatures. To achieve this, you will need to program as many run times as your controller will allow. Most clocks will have at least three possible start times for three different schedules, giving you a potential of nine start times. If one schedule is being used for your desert plants or flowers, you may have as few as six times available to start your turf water. The goal is to water your Rye seed at least every two hours during the heat of the day, and at least once during the night. I like to start at the most crucial time of day and work my way out. For example, with only six start times to work with, the schedule might look

like this: 7 a.m., 12 noon, 1 p.m., 3 p.m., 5 p.m., and 11 p.m. If I have more times available, I would fill in some of the early morning gaps.

You will need to really soak the seed on the first watering, and then run just a few minutes (for spray heads and longer for rotors) each time. If you start to experience puddling, cut back on the run time, NOT the start times. You should see germination within six to nine days and, with a little luck, will have “frog hair” in less than two weeks.

Start cutting the start times as soon as you see 50% to 80% germination. Take out the cooler time-of-day start times first (leave one at night). Your goal now is to “harden off” the new Rye seedlings gradually and get the turf dry enough to mow. (Hopefully, you took advantage of the mowing break to service and sharpen your mower!)

~ Tom