WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
KING COUNTY EXTENSION

Community Horticulture Fact Sheet #115

Renovating and Maintaining Home Lawns

Renovation describes corrective procedures to restore beauty to an old lawn without removing all of the sod. It can be as simple as overseeding a thin turf area or can include power raking and core aeration if thatch is greater than 1/2 inch or the soil is compacted. It is a much more severe treatment than normal dethatching (power raking), which should be practiced on lawns as needed. A total renovation would involve killing the undesirable grasses with a nonselective herbicide and may require more than one spray application (see Item 7 on following page). Ninety percent of turfgrass renovations are not successful as far as changing turfgrass species due to the fact the areas are usually sprayed once, overseeded, and expected to be totally converted to a new species. When not done properly, the site will look good to begin with, but will eventually return to the conditions (species) existing before renovation. If all sod is removed and soil cultivated, follow procedures for establishing new lawns.

Renovation

Some management practices will cause turf problems to develop that require renovation to correct. These problems and a brief description are discussed.

Grass Selection

Turf-type perennial ryegrasses, fine-leaved fescues, and bentgrasses are well-adapted to western Washington, with more evaluation of tall fescues being conducted. Kentucky bluegrasses are usually shortlived in western Washington and only selected improved cultivars should be used and never seeded alone.

Homeowners who prefer bentgrass lawns in western Washington should plant only the colonial types such as Bardot, Tracenta, Highland, Astoria, or Exeter. Never plant creeping bentgrasses such as Seaside, Penncross, Pennlinks, Putter, or Emerald. These varieties have vigorous growth habits and excessive thatch forming characteristics .The average homeowner does not have the equipment and, frequently, the knowledge necessary to maintain these varieties over a large number of years. Never plant bentgrasses in eastern Washington lawns because of excessive thatch formation and winter disease problems.

Thatch Removal

Power rake good quality lawns if thatch exceeds 1/2 inch in depth. The removal of dead stems and surface roots and accumulated organic debris of all sorts will prevent excessive thatch formation and the necessity for renovation. As thatch builds up in a lawn, the mower tends to run higher from the ground, especially where lightweight mowers are used. Excess thatch can also serve as a home for insects and increased disease development.

Watering Practices

Saturated soils tend to induce surface rooting. Roots will develop where oxygen supplies are greatest and saturated soils have very low oxygen concentrations. Thorough, infrequent watering is much more desirable than light, frequent applications and is regulated by soil texture and depth. Light, frequent applications tend to encourage weedy grasses and certain broadleaf weeds and decrease the quality of desirable grasses. Close observation of the turf will indicate the need for water before wilting or browning occurs. A soil probe can be used to feel the soil for its moisture content.

Turfgrass Losses from Pests

Lawns severely damaged by insects, diseases, or uncontrolled weeds may have to be renovated to correct the problem. Discreet and proper use of pesticides as necessary can control these problems, giving longer life and beauty to the lawn as well as being environmentally conscious.

Renovation Procedure

Favorable spring and fall growing weather will hasten lawn recovery following renovation. Summer renovation may result in slow recovery and is generally not recommended. Total kill, sod removal, and reestablishment can be accomplished during the late summer period.

1. Adjust the mower to approximately 3/4 inch (slightly lower for bentgrasses) and mow the lawn thoroughly.
2. Power rake the lawn as many times as may be necessary to remove accumulated thatch. It is best to dethatch in opposite directions. Thoroughness is important.
3. When all thatch has been removed, mow the turf again at approximately 3/4 inch high.
4. Grass stems and crowns may be excessively thinned by heavy raking. If this is the case, over-seed the lawn at a rate of 1/2 the recommended rate of seed per 1,000 square feet for establishment, using varieties recommended for your area.
5. Before overseeding, remove sod from all high and low spots, adjust these areas to the proper lawn grade and replace the sod to obtain a uniformly smooth surface.
6. Growth will initiate quickly from grass stems and crowns that were not removed through the raking process and from the additional seed planted. Although the turf may be somewhat thin, mowing must be practiced regularly at the recommended mowing height. It is important to maintain surface moisture for germination of the newly applied seed.
7. Lawns having large patches of coarse, weedy grasses such as velvetgrass, unimproved tall fescue, orchardgrass, or nonturf type perennial ryegrasses can be best renovated if all vegetation is killed with glyphosate, the active ingredient in products such as Roundup®. Apply chemicals in mid- spring or late summer. It will probably take more than one application to kill creeping perennial grasses that have rhizomes. You have a choice of removing the dead sod or following steps 1–6 above for reestablishing new turf. It is advisable to increase the seeding rates recommended for new lawns in this case. One pound of available nitrogen

per 1,000 square feet from complete starter fertilizers applied following seeding will hasten establishment. If the soil is extremely sandy, two applications of 1/2 pound each per 1,000 square feet should be made instead of the one 1-pound application to avoid the possibility of nutrient loss.

A good lawn should last a lifetime if properly fertilized, watered, mowed, dethatched and overseeded as needed. Pests should be controlled when diagnosed as being at harmful levels to the turf area.

Maintenance

Good lawn-care practices are essential for maintaining healthy lawns. Whether newly planted, renovated, or established, there are a few important practices to follow: watering, mowing and fertilizing.

Watering

1. One inch of water per week is all that most lawns need to stay green and healthy. During hottest portions of the summer you can water up to three times per week. It is better to water once and deeply rather than apply frequent shallow waterings. Deep watering encourages deep roots less susceptible to drought and insect damage. **However, do not saturate the soil**. Soggy soil weakens and kills grass and encourages moss.
2. It is best to water lawns in the early morning hours, especially during warm summer months. Late evening watering is also a possibility. Check with your water district to see if any special restrictions or guidelines are in effect according to water demand at that time. Turn off water immediately if it begins to run-off the lawn. Aerating is needed to improve water soil penetration.
3. If you allow your lawn to go dormant (turn brown) during the summer, do not begin watering in midsummer and then cease watering. This will damage the grass. Some moistening of the soil is needed to keep dormant perennial ryegrass lawns from severely thinning once they recover.
4. Eliminate foot traffic on dormant grass.

Mowing

Mowing height can influence the length of life of lawns and also affect the appearance. The following mowing heights are recommended for grasses in the state of Washington:

1. Typical lawns (perennial rye and fine fescue)
   - Recommended mowing height is 2".
   - Mow only 1/3 total length of grass blades to prevent damage to crowns, which weakens the plants.
   - Grass-cycle as much as possible to return nutrients to your lawn. Frequent mowing works better than occasional mowing (longer grass blades can build thatch faster).
   - Compost or recycle grass clippings if you can't grass-cycle.
2. Bentgrass lawns
   - Recommended mowing height is ½" to ¾"
   - Don't mow more than 1/3 the total height of the grass.
   - Grass-cycling is not recommended for bentgrass lawns.

Fertilizing

1. WSU recommends fertilizing four times per year to maintain lawn health, in April, June, September, and November.
2. Use organic fertilizers with an approximate 3-1-2 ratio and apply at the recommended rate. The ratio refers to portions of nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorous.
3. In November, use only a synthetic, slow release fertilizer labeled as fall-and-winter fertilizer. Nutrients in organic fertilizers are not available to the lawn in cooler weather.
4. **Do not use weed-and-feed or fertilizers containing pesticides**. Broadcast treatment of spot problems contaminates the environment and places small children and pets at risk.

Weeds

1. Whenever possible remove weeds using mechanical methods.
2. If an herbicide is necessary, identify the weed you need to eliminate.
3. Spot treat weeds using appropriate herbicide following label directions and using appropriate safety measures.

Pesticides

1. Use pesticides with care. Apply them only to plants, animals, or sites listed on the label.
2. When mixing and applying pesticides, follow all label precautions to protect yourself and others around you
3. It is a violation of the law to disregard label directions.
4. If pesticides are spilled on skin or clothing, remove clothing and wash skin thoroughly.
5. Store pesticides in their original containers and keep them out of the reach of children, pets, and livestock.

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