

Establishing a New Lawn

Provided by the Goochland-Powhatan Master Gardener Association, www.gpmga.org for viriniagardening.com

The best time of year to start a new lawn is September 15 to October 15 because it gives the seed enough warm weather to sprout and the whole winter for the roots to grow before the hot, dry days of summer. If you do start a new lawn in the spring it should be done as early as the soil can be worked in March or early April to give the roots as much time as possible to grow before hot weather.

The first steps are measuring and soil testing. Call the Master Gardeners or Extension agent for soil sample boxes and directions. Existing perennial or grassy weeds can be taken care of at this time by properly applying a herbicide. A non-selective herbicide such as glyphosate (ROUNDUP or similar product) will kill everything it touches so follow container directions and apply carefully on a non-windy day using the "weed killer sprayer". Weed treatment should be done about two weeks before planting grass or the residues could kill the new seed.

If you have a problem with water draining away from buildings or sitting in low spots now is the time to correct this. Fill in low spots and slope the subgrade away from buildings. Newly graded areas should be allowed to settle two or more rains before seeding to be sure it is draining correctly. Also, remove building debris, rocks, sticks, etc. from the area.

If you are adding topsoil add 8-10 inches to have the ideal 6-8 inches after settling. If topsoil is limited or nonexistent, till the available soil to a total depth of 4-6 inches. Before tilling the soil evenly spread all the recommended lime and two-thirds of the recommended fertilizer over the area. After tilling, apply the remaining one-third of the fertilizer to the surface and lightly rake into the soil just prior to seeding. When lime is to be tilled into the soil always use ground or powdered limestone not pelletized.

Rake the seedbed to create shallow, uniform depressions (rows) about one quarter inch deep. For the best coverage divide the seed in half, sow the first half in one direction (north/south) and the other half in the opposite direction. Cover the seed by raking lightly. Next, the seedbed should be rolled. Mulch the area with 1-1/2 to 2 bales of weed-free straw per 1000 square feet. This should cover 50 to 75 percent of the soil surface and does not need to be removed after the grass grows.

Blue grass is not recommended for this area because the winters are not cold enough. In this area tall fescue blends are best for sunny areas and a fine fescue blend for shady areas. There are many varieties available today but it is best to ask for recommendations from the Extension agent or at a local store that has a specialized lawn and garden department. Use 3 to 4 lbs. of seed/1,000 sq.ft.

New seeds require watering daily to insure constant surface moisture for 30 days following planting. Several light waterings may be necessary on hot days until seeds have germinated and then deeper waterings. A spring-started lawn may also need deep waterings over a hot, dry summer. Begin mowing the new lawn when the grass is one-third taller than the intended mowing height of 2 to 3 inches, use

sharp blades, avoid excessive traffic until the lawn is mature, and do not apply weed control until the lawn has been mowed at least twice.

It usually takes two full growing seasons for a lawn to become fully established and exhibit the desirable characteristics such as drought and wear tolerance, density, and competition against weeds. For a spring-started lawn, no more fertilizer will be needed until fall. For a fall-started lawn you will need to do the light feeding about May 15. Call the Master Gardeners or Extension agent for a maintenance plan which will help your lawn mature and persist.