The Right Grass for the Right Place

A Guide to Assist with Turf Selection

No one grass is ideal for all locations. It is important to select a grass that is not only suitable for the conditions, but also for the water needs and its use in the landscape. Use this guide to assist you with selecting the grass type that is right for your landscape.
Choosing the Right Grass

Lawns express a familiar aesthetic that can easily be traced to our European ancestors. They provide notable practical and psychological value to our homes and communities. For these and other reasons, large expanses of grass are and integral part of traditional landscapes throughout America. This approach may have its place in the higher rainfall areas of the eastern United States, but in Colorado Springs’ semi-arid climate, many grasses need a lot of supplemental irrigation to stay lush and green. So it is important to limit water-consuming lawn grass to areas in the landscape where it will be most useful and can be efficiently watered.

For instance, if you have children or pets who need a play area, a grassy part of the back yard makes sense. If you have a sloped front yard where the only foot traffic is confined to the cement sidewalk, a water-wise groundcover, such as thyme, Snow-in-Summer, Creeping Veronica or junipers, would be a good alternative to grass.

Four Steps to Establishing the Right Lawn

1. Selecting the right grass

There are many varieties of turf grass. To select the best grass for your location and needs, it is important to understand a little about grasses in general.

To begin, grasses are either cool-season or warm-season. In the Colorado Springs area, cool-season grasses normally start to turn green in April and will stay green until October. Cool-season grasses grow fastest in spring and tend to go partially dormant in the heat of the summer. Warm-season grasses green up at the end of May, grow fastest in summer, and go dormant with the first hard frost, usually in early October. They tend to have a light tan color while dormant.
Grasses are also categorized as either a sod-forming or bunch grass. A sod-forming grass will spread by stolons or rhizomes – eventually forming an interwoven “mat” of grass. A bunch grass will not spread in the same manner – each grass plant remains largely separate from its fellow plants, though many will form a sod with consistent mowing. There is no such thing as the “perfect” grass – every grass species has its good and bad points. The information contained in this booklet should help you select the best grass for your particular situation.

2. EVALUATING AND PREPARING THE SOIL

Soil along the Rocky Mountain Front Range tends to fall into one of two categories: heavy clay or sand. Neither is ideal for turf grass. New construction sites face an even greater problem, since most of the existing top soil is removed during the construction process, and the remaining soil is compacted by construction traffic. A soil test can determine the structure and make-up of your soil and help you make better decisions in preparing your landscape. There should be a minimum of 4 to 6 inches of loose, amended soil in order for turf to perform well.

Lack of initial soil preparation is a major reason for subsequent lawn failure. Take the following steps to prepare your soil for seed or sod:

- Clear the site of any debris, stones, building materials, etc. If there is existing turf grass that will be replaced, either use a sod cutter to remove the turf or use a non-selective herbicide to kill the turf.
- Eliminate weed problems prior to seeding, planting or sodding.
- Grade the area to eliminate any drainage problems.
- Apply a “starter fertilizer” that contains nitrogen and phosphorus; use the rate recommended for the particular product.
- Add 1 to 2 inches of soil amendments (compost, sphagnum peat, aged manure – 3 cubic yards of amendment will cover 1,000 square feet to a depth of 1 inch) and rototill to a depth of 6 to 8 inches (or as deep as
possible). If an herbicide was used to kill the grass, the dead grass blades may be tilled into the soil with the amendment.

Then, finish grading the site.

3. Seeding or installing sod

Seeding: To seed a lawn, sow the recommended number of pounds per 1,000 square feet uniformly across the area. For more uniform coverage, seed in two directions: north-south and east-west, using half the allotted seed in each direction. After seeding, lightly rake the seed into the soil, being careful not to go too deep. If desired, cover with a light mulch of straw or sphagnum peat moss. Finally, use a roller to firm the soil surface.

Installing sod: To install sod, start with the longest straight line (i.e. along a driveway or sidewalk). Push edges of sod together tightly, but avoid stretching the sod. Stagger the seams in each row of sod, as if you were laying brick, and try to avoid leaving small strips at outer edges. After laying the sod, use a roller to ensure good soil contact and level out any uneven spots, then water thoroughly.

4. Watering a new lawn

A newly-seeded lawn must be kept moist, but not saturated, until the seeds germinate. Depending on the weather and site conditions, this may mean watering for a short time, several times a day. As the grass begins to grow, reduce the frequency of watering. After four to six weeks, watering should be reduced to the amount recommended for an established lawn.

New sod must be watered enough to ensure that the soil beneath the sod stays moist, but not waterlogged. Water twice a day (early morning and late evening is preferable) for the first week, and once a day for the second week. At this point, roots should be established in the new soil, and watering can be reduced to the amount recommended for an established lawn. Remember to reprogram your sprinkler as the weather changes.
Crested Wheatgrass
Agropyron Cristatum

Moderate Water

A cool-season bunch grass.

Height: Grows to: 12 to 30 inches; mow to: 3 inches

Watering: 3/4 to 1 inch every week during hot, dry spells

Sun/Shade: Tolerates both sun and shade

Traffic: Fair tolerance to traffic

Texture: Medium leaf blades with a medium texture

Color: Varies from light green to blue-green

Planting: Seed 5 pounds per 1,000 square feet of lawn; not available as sod; planting season is mid-March to early June and mid-August through October; avoid planting during the heat of summer

Varieties: Turf-type varieties include Ephraim, Fairway, Hycrest, and RoadCrest

Advantages: Excellent tolerance of heat, cold, drought, and low fertility; goes dormant quickly under drought conditions and is equally quick to recover from drought dormancy

Disadvantages: Although tolerant of drought and low fertility, needs regular fertilization and supplemental irrigation to look its best; bare spots will need to be reseeded; doesn't form a dense sod, so weed invasion may be a problem
BUFFALO GRASS
Buchloe dactyloides

LOW WATER

A warm-season sod-forming grass.

**HEIGHT:** Grows to: 4 to 8 inches; mow to: 2 to 2 1/2 inches (or leave unmowed)

**WATERING:** 1/2 to 3/4 inch every two weeks during hot, dry spells

**SUN/SHADE:** Likes full sun; poor to fair shade-tolerance

**TRAFFIC:** Fair to good tolerance to traffic during periods of active growth

**TEXTURE:** Fine blades with a soft texture during periods of active growth

**COLOR:** Blue-green

**PLANTING:** Seed, sod and plugs available; from late May to late July; seed 2 to 3 pounds per 1,000 square feet of lawn, or as instructed by seed supplier; use “treated” seed for better germination; sodding can be done as late as early August

**VARIETIES:** A few turf-type varieties available as seed include Tatanka, Topgun, Cody, Plains, Bison, and Sharp’s II. Some of these may also be available as plugs or sod. Other turf-type varieties sold only as sod or plugs are 609 and Legacy. The 609 variety is good for protected, warmer areas only. Legacy appears to be well-adapted to the Front Range

**ADVANTAGES:** Attractive and requires minimal water and fertilizer once established; good for sunny areas such as slopes where foot traffic is minimal; grows well in heavy clay soils; few insect or disease problems; low fertility requirement; very heat- and drought-tolerant; goes dormant when stressed and can stay dormant for extended periods

**DISADVANTAGES:** Not very traffic-tolerant during dormancy (October to May); weeds and weed control can be a problem; more prone to weed invasion when over-fertilized; stolons will invade vegetable and flower beds; will not grow in sandy soils; does not perform well as a lawn above 6000 feet
Blue Grama  
*Bouteloua gracilis*

**LOW WATER**

A warm-season bunch grass.  
State Grass of Colorado

**Height:** Grows to: 8 to 15 inches; mow to: 2 1/2 to 3 inches or leave unmowed to allow development of attractive seedheads

**Watering:** 1/2 to 3/4 inch every two weeks during hot, dry spells

**Sun/Shade:** Likes full sun; poor to fair shade-tolerance

**Traffic:** Fair tolerance to traffic during periods of active growth

**Texture:** Fine blades with a soft texture during periods of active growth

**Color:** Blue-green

**Planting:** Seed or plugs only; sod not available; in early May to late July, seed 2 to 3 pounds per 1,000 square feet of lawn (or as instructed by seed supplier)

**Varieties:** Best varieties include Hachita, Lovington, and Alma

**Advantages:** Attractive; requires minimal water and fertilization once established; won’t invade flower or vegetable beds; good for sunny areas such as slopes where foot traffic is minimal; grows well in clay and low fertility soils; few insect or disease problems; very heat- and drought-tolerant; goes dormant when stressed and can stay dormant for extended periods

**Disadvantages:** Not very traffic-tolerant during dormancy (October to May); weeds and weed control can be a problem especially during establishment; seed and plugs are expensive; doesn’t perform well as a lawn above 6,500 feet elevation
Turf-Type Tall Fescue
Festuca arundinacea

A cool-season bunch grass.
**Height:** Grows to: 24 to 48 inches; mow to: 3 inches

**Watering:** 3/4 to 1 inch every week during hot, dry spells; if planted in heavy clay soil that prevents development of long root system, may require as much water as Kentucky bluegrass

**Sun/Shade:** Likes full sun to moderate shade

**Traffic:** Good tolerance

**Texture:** Wide leaf blades with coarse texture

**Color:** Dark green

**Planting:** Using a named variety, or blend of named varieties, seed 6 to 8 pounds per 1,000 square feet of lawn or as instructed by seed supplier; planting season is mid-March to early June and mid-August through September; avoid planting during the heat of summer; also available as sod, but may be hard to find; proper soil preparation is essential for optimum performance

**Advantages:** Attractive; does well in shade; has few disease or insect problems; won’t invade flower or vegetable beds; lower fertility requirements.

**Disadvantages:** Requires regular supplemental irrigation; because of the fibrous root system, bare spots will need to be reseeded; wider blades may shred when mower blades are dull
A group of cool-season grasses, which include creeping red fescue, chewings fescue, hard fescue and sheep fescue. Creeping red fescue is sod-forming, the others are bunch grasses.

**Height:** Grows to: Varies according to species; mow to: 2 1/2 to 3 inches

**Watering:** 1/2 to 3/4 inch every week during hot, dry spells

**Sun/Shade:** Prefers partial to full shade; probably the most shade-tolerant of grasses

**Traffic:** Fair tolerance to traffic

**Texture:** Fine blades with soft texture

**Color:** Medium green

**Planting:** Using named varieties, seed 5 pounds per 1,000 square feet of lawn; not available as sod; planting season is mid-March to early June and mid-August through September; avoid planting during the heat of summer

**Advantages:** Establishes quickly; resistant to most diseases; good resistance to drought; very shade tolerant; does well at higher altitudes

**Disadvantages:** Not heat-tolerant and may go dormant during extended hot spells; only fair traffic-tolerance; tough leaves make it harder to mow than other grasses
**Perennial Ryegrass**  
**Lolium perenne**

A cool-season bunchgrass.

**Height:** Grows to: 10 to 24 inches; mow to: 2 1/2 to 3 inches

**Watering:** 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 inches per week during hot, dry spells

**Sun/Shade:** Poor to fair shade-tolerance; prefers full sun

**Traffic:** Good tolerance; sometimes used alone or mixed with Kentucky bluegrass for sports fields

**Texture:** Glossy leaf blades with medium texture

**Color:** Medium to dark green

**Planting:** Using named varieties, seed 6 to 8 pounds per 1,000 square feet; planting season is mid-March to early June and mid-August through September; avoid planting during the heat of summer; not available as pure sod, but may be mixed with Kentucky bluegrass to form a sod

**Advantages:** Germinates and establishes quickly from seed; glossy, attractive leaf blades; tolerates foot traffic

**Disadvantages:** Poor drought-tolerance; may winter kill in cold, dry winters; dull mowers may shred grass blades; needs regular fertilization for best performance
**Kentucky Bluegrass**  
*Poa pratensis*

**High Water**

A cool-season sod-forming grass.

**Height:** Grows to: 18 to 24 inches; mow to: 2 1/2 to 3 inches

**Watering:** 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 inches every week during hot, dry spells; may need less water in shade, well-amended soil, or if homeowner will accept less than optimum appearance

**Sun/Shade:** Likes full sun to light shade; some varieties such as Bristol, Glade, Nugget, and America tolerate shade better than other varieties

**Traffic:** Good tolerance to traffic; some varieties more so than others

**Texture:** Fine blades with soft texture

**Color:** Varies from medium to very dark green

**Planting:** Using a named variety or a blend of named varieties, seed 3 to 4 pounds per 1,000 square feet of lawn or as instructed by seed supplier; seeding season is mid-March to early June and mid-August through September; avoid seeding during the heat of summer; commonly available as sod; sodding can be done any time of year, if the ground is not frozen, soil can be properly prepared, and if the sod can be harvested; however, the best times to install sod are spring and fall

**Advantages:** Attractive; high quality turf with good traffic-tolerance; sod is relatively inexpensive and readily available; good for yards with children or pets because it has a rhizomatosous root system and can fill in bare spots; goes dormant when drought-stressed; can survive several months of drought; some varieties more drought-tolerant than others

**Disadvantages:** Requires regular supplemental irrigation; some disease and insect problems; will invade flower and vegetable gardens; needs regular fertilization for best performance