



Basic Home Lawn Care

University of California Cooperative Extension
Stanislaus County



A lawn can be an attractive part of a landscape, if cared for properly. Not all lawns are created equal, so it's important to understand a few basic principles when choosing a new lawn, or caring for an existing one.

LAWN TYPES

Grasses are categorized as either warm season or cool season types. The grasses listed in this publication do well in the San Joaquin Valley.

WARM SEASON

Common Bermudagrass
Bermudagrass lawns are drought tolerant and use less water than most lawn types. However, to look their best, bermudagrass lawns should be periodically dethatched.

The term "warm season" refers to the fact that these grasses are mostly subtropical in origin, and go dormant as weather turns cold in fall and winter. Common bermudagrass is the most often used warm season grass in Stanislaus County.

Bermudagrass does not tolerate shade and turns brown when temperatures get below 50° F. This dormant state lasts until weather warms, then the grass will turn green again.

Overseed with a cool season ryegrass to keep lawn green throughout the year.

COOL SEASON

The term "cool season" refers to the fact that these grasses do not go dormant in winter, like bermudagrass and other warm season grasses.

Cool season grass types include tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass. Often these grasses are mixed to form a blend of grasses that do well together.

Although called "cool season," grasses, these lawn types generally perform well in summer. The tall fescue types are the most commonly planted cool season grasses in Stanislaus County.

Tall fescue is drought tolerant and has a high to moderate tolerance for heat. However, in order to flourish, it needs more lawn water than warm season grasses.

WHAT TO DO FOR SHADE

Most lawns need 4 to 5 hours of full sun, or an entire day of filtered light. Lawns in deep shade often have disease problems because of reduced light. Also, turf that has been wet by irrigation,

dew or rain water does not dry out as quickly as needed. Signs that your lawn is not doing well in shade include reduced shoot and root growth and the development of overly fine leaf blades.

There are lawn mixes on the market that are specially blended for shady conditions, and this is indicated on their packaging label.

To create more filtered light for your lawn, selectively prune tree branches. Remove limbs that are about 8 feet above the ground. Take care to prune correctly, and not to over-prune your tree. For more information on correct tree pruning, see "Trees in Your Home Garden" which is available in our office for the cost of \$1. Or download it free http://cestanislaus.ucdavis.edu/Gardening/Gardening_Publications.htm

SCARY SPRINKLERS?

Don't allow your sprinkler system to intimidate you. Instead, read the manual and practice setting the timers until you feel comfortable with the controls.

If you can't find your sprinkler manual, you may be able to locate it online or through a lawn and garden supply store.

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COOL WEATHER & LAWN

In fall and winter when weather is cool, turn sprinklers off and allow rainwater to supplement your lawn. If rain is infrequent and weather turns warm, amend by turning sprinklers on when the soil is dry.

WATERING

Unfortunately, a specific “recipe” for how and when to water your lawn does not exist. Watering depends on many factors, including soil type, grass species and temperature. Here are two simple ways to tell it’s time to water your lawn.

Tip #1 Your lawn begins to turn from dark green to a bluish green, which is a sign of water stress.

Tip #2 After walking on your lawn, you detect the grass blades do not “spring back” after a few minutes.

Here are some instructions to help you determine a watering schedule that’s right for your lawn.

WATER SCENARIO 1

Turn sprinklers on for 20 minutes and observe. Does the water run off before the allotted time? If so, you may have a clay soil type, compacted soil and/or thatch

buildup in your lawn. Take a screwdriver and poke it into the grass. How far did the water travel? If water did not penetrate into the soil at least 6-8 inches, you need to find out why.

Wait a few hours and try watering again. Does the water penetrate farther this time? If so, you may need to water twice during the same day, several hours apart. Then, wait a few days for soil to dry out before applying more water.

WATER SCENARIO 2

If water does not run off after 20 minutes, you may have a sandy soil type. Sandy soil has a gritty feel to it. Use a screwdriver to examine how deeply water penetrated the soil beneath your lawn.

Now, figure out how quickly soil dries out by checking it on a daily basis. If soil is dry by the 5th day (for example), set sprinklers according to this frequency. In summer, do the test again and reset your sprinklers. As temperatures fluctuate, you will need to adjust your sprinkler timer.

MOWING & EDGING

Set your mower blade to the correct height for your lawn type. This ensures that you do not damage the grass blades. As a rule, mow no more than

1/3 of the grass height at a time.

For warm season turfgrass, set your mower at 1/2 to 1 inch. For cool season grasses, use a setting of 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 inches.

Bermudagrass spreads by both rhizomes and stolons, and can easily invade other areas of your yard. Edge your lawn frequently to prevent grass from creeping into flower beds.

DROUGHT TOLERANCE VS HEAT TOLERANCE

Drought tolerant plants can go for longer periods without water than most plants. Heat tolerant plants can survive during hot weather, but will still need supplemental water.

NO-MOW LAWNS

If you’re tired of mowing your lawn on a weekly basis, consider planting hard fescue. This cool season grass can be left unmowed, and makes a great lawn for sloped areas that are difficult to mow. It also tolerates shade. Hard fescue does not resemble a “normal” lawn in height. Left unmowed, it will reach a height of 4-6 inches.

Hard fescue does not do well during high summer temperatures. It is, however, drought tolerant and will “green up” in the fall when temperatures cool.

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FERTILIZING

If your lawn appears green, then it is healthy and most likely does not need fertilizer. Lawns that are yellow-green to yellow in color may benefit from fertilization. Dead patches might indicate other issues such as irrigation deficiency or disease.

Also, remember that warm season grasses are dormant in the winter. Adding water or fertilizer will not help this problem.

Avoid applying fertilizer to cool season grasses during hot periods, as this may stress your lawn. Also avoid applying fertilizer to warm season lawns during hot periods, as the lawn is already growing quickly, and extra fertilizer will add to your mowing frequency.

MORE INFORMATION

The UC Healthy Lawns Internet website has step-by-step instructions on how to plant lawn, and overseed or renovate it. It also has directions on how to aerate and dethatch your lawn. The website may also help to diagnose a lawn problem. Access the website at:
<http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/TOOLS/TURF/index.html>

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