

Going for the Green

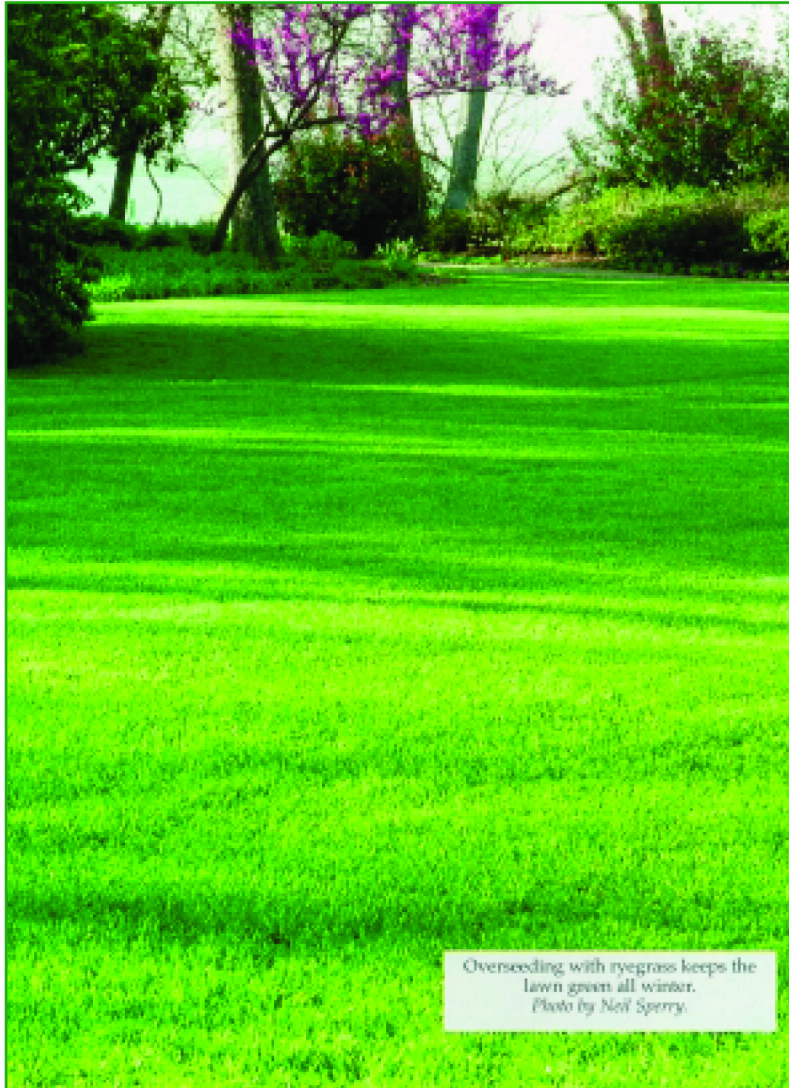
by James A. McAfee

Associate Professor and Turfgrass Specialist (Dallas)

In early fall, a homeowner's thoughts turn to overseeding. As with any lawn-care program, there are some pros and cons. Consider these factors before overseeding your lawn with a cool-season turfgrass.

Advantages

■ Overseeding a warm-season turfgrass lawn with a cool-season turfgrass such as perennial ryegrass will provide an attractive green color for the landscape throughout winter. This aesthetic value is the main reason commercial properties overseed their lawns in fall. Although annual ryegrass is less expensive than perennial rye, it requires more frequent mowing—every two or three days in spring. Perennial rye is finer-textured than annual rye. It dies out more quickly in spring, allowing permanent turfgrass to emerge.



Overseeding with ryegrass keeps the lawn green all winter.
Photo by Neil Sperry.

■ On the home front, overseeding not only keeps the lawn looking green and attractive during winter, but it can help protect permanent warm-season turfgrass from wear and tear if it gets heavy foot traffic. Protection of permanent warm-season turf such as bermudagrass and St. Augustinegrass is the main reason that baseball and soccer fields are overseeded in fall. The cool-season grass protects the dominant turf.

Disadvantages

■ Cool-season turfgrass must be planted into warm-season turfgrass in fall, when the warm-season turf is storing food for winter survival. Overseeding can inhibit the permanent turfgrass' ability to store enough food. It's often recommended that you "scalp" warm-season turf before planting the overseeding grass. This scalping can further inhibit the production and storage of food by the warm-season turfgrass in fall.

■ If you overseed, you cannot apply a pre-emergent herbicide to control winter annual grassy weeds such as annual bluegrass. If weeds have been a problem in the past, then overseeding could worsen it.

■ When it's time for the permanent turfgrass — bermuda or St. Augustine — to begin growing in spring, the cool-season turfgrass is still actively growing and preventing the warm-season turfgrass from coming out of dormancy on time. During hard winters, this delay, called "transition", can cause problems for the permanent warm-season turfgrass.

■ Not all warm-season turf types tolerate overseeding. While the hybrid bermudagrasses and, to some extent, common bermudagrass tolerate overseeding very well, grasses such as St. Augustine, buffalo and some of the zoysias do not. Never overseed turfgrasses that are growing in moderate to heavy shade. If you do, the ryegrass will survive and linger into summer, preventing warm-season turfgrass from coming out of dormancy on time and resulting in a thin stand of permanent turf that's easily invaded by weeds.

Waterwise Update: 'Gray Water'

Have you ever heard the term "gray water" and wondered what it means? Gray water is defined as water that's generated by household use of bathtubs, bathroom basins, showers and clothes washing machines. This system excludes water from toilets, dishwashers and kitchen sinks.

In many areas of the U.S., the use of gray water in home landscapes is being promoted as an important new process for the recovery of used water. Gray water systems are generally installed when new homes are built. It can be very expensive to retrofit an existing home with the dual plumbing needed for gray water.

While the use of gray water offers a method to save water and, potentially, money for homeowners, there are some concerns:

There are currently no laws in Texas that regulate gray water use in landscapes. While some communities are developing codes, none is in place at this time.

The quality of water that's developed through the reuse of gray water is a concern. For example, if the potable water in your area has a high salt or a high sodium level, the amount of salts or the amount of sodium in the gray water can be higher than the potable water source. In some cases, the level could be high enough to cause problems with plants that are sensitive to salts. Also it's questionable what effect other products such as shampoos may have on turf and ornamental quality.

Before installing a gray water system for your home, check the quality of your potable water source. Also, determine if the amount of water generated through the gray water system will be enough for the total area being irrigated. An excessive amount can cause problems such as an increase in plant diseases.

***About the author:** Dr. James A. McAfee is Turfgrass Specialist with Texas A&M Research and Extension Center at Dallas.*

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If you decide to overseed

1. Check with your county Extension office for regional planting dates. Ideally, you'll sow cool-season grass seed after the warm-season turf has slowed its growth and before the danger of an early freeze.
2. Prepare the seedbed to make sure the cool-season turfgrass seed comes into contact with the soil. The easiest way to ensure good seed/soil contacts is to scalp the lawn. Mow the lawn at 1 to 1 ½ inches prior to planting. Seeds in contact with soil have a much higher chance of germinating and surviving. It's also easier to maintain moisture around seeds that are in contact with soil. Also, seeds that germinate in turfgrass, not at ground level, are easily killed by freezing temperatures.
3. Recommended seeding rate for perennial ryegrass in home lawns: 5 to 7 pounds per 1,000 square feet. This is enough seed to produce a thick, healthy stand of ryegrass in a short period of time.
4. Before you overseed, apply a complete fertilizer such as 12-12-12 to ensure that young seedlings have sufficient phosphorus for root development. Apply fertilizer at a rate of 8 to 10 pounds per 1,000 square feet.
5. When sowing grass seeds, screen off adjacent flower and groundcover beds and garden paths so seeds won't fall in those areas and germinate.
6. Once you've planted the seeds, you must thoroughly soak the lawn. Do not, however, apply water to the runoff point as this will wash away some of the seeds.
7. Continue watering daily until the seeds germinate and the ryegrass seedlings begin to grow. Do not allow seeds to become dry once they germinate.
8. After germination occurs, decrease the frequency of watering, but apply more water per session. Don't overwater young seedlings. This will encourage diseases.
9. When seedlings are 2 to 3 inches tall, you can mow. The best height to maintain perennial ryegrass is 1 ½ to 2 inches.
10. Sharpen your lawn mower blade. Ryegrass has a tough leaf blade, and a dull mower blade won't cut it smoothly.

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