

## Seeding Tall Fescue Lawns

Tall fescue is one of the most popular grasses in the mountain and upper Piedmont areas of Georgia, an area that extends as far south as Atlanta. Its popularity relates to its ease of establishment through seeding and its attractive green color during spring and fall, when warm-season turfgrasses are dormant and brown. Tall fescue is a perennial bunch-type grass that grows rapidly during spring and fall.



### **Establishment:**

September and October are generally the best time to plant tall fescue. Earlier seeding tends to undergo excessive heat stress and seedling diseases, and later planting may not be fully established prior to winter. Seeding in December and early spring is generally not recommended because the plant does not have time to develop the deep root system needed to survive the hot summer.

### **Soil Preparation:**

The key to successful establishment of a lawn is proper soil preparation. First, remove all debris such as rocks and tree stumps. Add any amendments such as organic matter, sand or topsoil for soil improvement and till thoroughly into the existing soil. After initial preparation is completed and the area is properly leveled, collect a soil sample to obtain soil fertilizer recommendations. Till the starter fertilizer and lime 4 to 6 inches into the soil before planting. Apply enough fertilizer to supply 1.5 to 2 pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 feet.

### **Seeding:**

Plant quality seed that is certified and identified by a blue tag. Such seed has been tested and the information on the label is assured by law. Orchardgrass is a common weed seed found in tall fescue seed and is easily seen in lawns because of its blue-green color and slightly faster growth than tall fescue. It also cannot be selectively controlled with a herbicide.

Plant 5 pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet using a mechanical spreader. Divide the seed into two equal parts and spread half in one direction and the other half at a right angle to the first direction. This procedure is also recommended for fertilizer or pesticide application. After seeding, lightly rake or drag the area to cover the seed to a depth of about 1/4 inch, and then lightly roll the soil to firm the seedbed. Applying a straw mulch is beneficial, especially on slopes; it helps prevent erosion and retains moisture for rapid germination.

**Irrigation:**

Irrigate lightly and often enough to prevent surface drying. This usually means daily watering of about 1/8 inch for the first three weeks. As the seedlings develop, decrease the irrigation frequency and increase the amount of water applied until normal practices can be followed.

**Mowing:**

Begin mowing at a height of 1 1/2 to 2 inches when the young seedlings reach 2 to 2 1/2 inches tall. Do not mow a grass when it is wet, especially young seedlings.

**Reseeding:**

As mentioned earlier, most tall fescue lawns thin out and need periodic reseeding. Turf thinning is usually caused by improper turf management like insufficient irrigation, too much nitrogen fertilizer, seeding with more than 5 pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet, mowing too low or too high, and seeding in late fall or spring. Additional problems include pests like crabgrass or white grub infestation, or disease problems like brown patch, or environmental conditions like hard compacted soil or tree shade and root competition. All of these factors, however, can be overcome with proper management.

If the lawn needs reseeding, estimate the percentage of tall fescue loss and multiply that number by the establishment seeding rate of 5 pounds per 1,000 square feet. For example, if 50 percent of the stand is dead, reseed with  $50 \times 5 = 2.5$  pounds per 1,000 square feet. Spring reseeding is less successful because of the shorter establishment time before summer heat and moisture stress.

Getting the seed in contact with the soil is necessary to assure successful reseeding. First, mow the lawn at a height of 1 to 1 1/2 inches. Disturb the soil preferably by coring or vertical mowing before and/or after seed distribution. This equipment is often available at rental or garden centers. Reseed thin areas at 2 to 5 pounds per 1,000 square feet. Work the seed into the soil; although not necessary, this reduces irrigation needs. Apply a starter fertilizer at about 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet at this time. Finally, keep the soil moist as discussed for establishment.

Additional information concerning turfgrass management can be obtained in Georgia Extension Service publication, *Lawns in Georgia*.

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**For Pesticide recommendations, please see the Georgia Pest Management Handbook  
Remember: Always follow pesticide label directions exactly.**

**For More Information: Contact Your Local County Extension Agent.**