

Grasses for Michigan Lawns



Recommended Turfgrasses



The establishment of a satisfactory, permanent lawn requires the selection of adapted turfgrass species and cultivars. An inferior

quality lawn or failure to establish a lawn will result if the grasses selected are not adapted to the environment, level of maintenance, or use. In Michigan, only a few species of grass are suitable for a lawn. They include Kentucky bluegrass, fine-leaved fescue and perennial ryegrass. The relatively new turf type, tall fescues also may also prove suitable for select uses.

Kentucky Bluegrass

Kentucky bluegrass is the most widely used turfgrass in Michigan. With proper management, it forms a long lasting lawn, and it is an aggressive sod former. Bluegrass grows rapidly during cool, moist weather, with slower growth during hot, dry weather. When rainfall is not adequate, watering is necessary to maintain high quality. All cultivars

respond well to a mowing height of 2 - 3.75 inches.

Many cultivars of Kentucky bluegrass are available, and new selections are constantly being introduced. Cultivars may differ in color, disease resistance, vigor, and amount of care required for best performance. Unfortunately, no single cultivar provides ideal performance under every condition. Even disease resistance can change as new strains of diseases appear.

Bluegrass cultivars are often placed in one of two categories: improved or common. Improved cultivars have greater disease resistance and vigor and can provide a thick, beautiful lawn if well maintained. Common cultivars possess less disease resistance, and severe discoloration and thinning from leafspot diseases commonly occur. However, common cultivars perform fairly well in utility lawns under low maintenance.

Fine-leaved Fescues

Fine-leaved fescues are cool season turfgrasses that are more tolerant of shady and infertile, droughty soils than

Kentucky bluegrasses. The fine leafed fescues are best adapted to dry, shady sites and will not tolerate wet, poorly drained soils. Compared to bluegrasses, fescues require minimal levels of management, including less fertilizer and water. Excessive fertilization or irrigation can cause a severe thinning of a fine leafed fescue lawn. Leafspot diseases can also cause an extensive thinning of the lawn during midsummer. For these reasons, fine leafed fescues are seldom grown alone, but are primarily used in mixtures with bluegrasses. Red fescue, chewings fescue and hard fescue are the three fine leafed fescue species grown in Michigan. Red fescue is a sod former, while chewings fescue and hard fescue are bunch type grasses.

Perennial Ryegrasses

Perennial ryegrasses have an erect bunch-type growth habit with rapid seed germination and establishment. Medium levels of fertility and well-drained soils are preferred. Both common and improved perennial ryegrasses are available. Common or unimproved types tend to be short-lived, due to lack of winter hardiness. These common types also have a coarse appearance and a tough fibrous leaf with poor mowing quality. Improved cultivars developed for turf use have greater winter hardiness and better mowing characteristics. Only these improved cultivars should be considered for a lawn where rapid cover and wear tolerance are required. Ryegrasses may be seeded in combination with bluegrasses

to establish a lawn on sloping areas where erosion is a potential problem.

Rough Bluegrass

Rough bluegrass forms a light green prostrate turf that is adapted to moist, shaded conditions. It is superior to Kentucky bluegrass in establishment vigor, but will not tolerate traffic or hot, dry conditions. It does not blend well with most turfgrasses, due to its light green color. Rough bluegrass is not recommended except for wet, shaded sites where fine leafed fescues will not persist.

Turf Type, Tall Fescues

KY-31 and similar, older varieties of tall fescue have generally not been recommended for turf uses. Please refer to section below. However, a new generation of finer textured, tall fescues has been introduced. These grasses have shown to be very wear and drought tolerant. Disease and insect problems have been minimal and performance on dry, sandy sites has been very good. They will also perform well in sun and shade. Winter hardiness seems adequate in southeast Michigan, but hardiness in other areas is unknown. Tall fescues are bunch type grasses and should not be used for overseeding or mixed with other grass species.

TURFGRASSES NOT RECOMMENDED

Bentgrasses

Bentgrasses form an extremely fine textured, dense, high quality turf when managed correctly. However, good

cultural practices are so expensive and time consuming that few homeowners are prepared to maintain a bentgrass lawn. The primary use of bentgrass is on golf course greens. When found in a home lawn, bentgrass is usually considered a weed. Bentgrass is not compatible with Kentucky bluegrass and should never be included in a lawn seed mixture.

Tall Fescue

Tall Fescue should not be confused with the fine-leafed fescues. Older varieties, such as KY-31, are very coarse-textured, perennial turfgrass species under Michigan growing conditions. Tall fescue has good tolerance to intense wear, heat stress and drought. However, due to the coarse texture of tall fescue and its tendency to form “clumps” of coarse grass, older varieties of tall fescue are not recommended in Michigan. Also, these varieties lack adequate winter hardiness in northern portions of the state.

Zoysiagrass

Zoysiagrass (or Japanese lawn grass) is a perennial, warm season turfgrass. Zoysiagrass turns straw colored with the first hard freeze in the fall and remains brown until early summer. It is established vegetatively by sprigs or plugs and generally requires two or more growing seasons for establishment. Meyer and Midwest are relatively winter hardy cultivars in southern Michigan. Emerald will winter kill severely. Although Zoysiagrass is widely advertised, and is satisfactory for use in warmer climates, it is not recommended for use in Michigan lawns.

Annual Ryegrass

Annual ryegrass or Italian rye is an annual bunch type grass. This grass winter kills and its use in turf areas is not recommended. If rapid germination and quick cover are needed to prevent erosion, select one of the improved turf type perennial ryegrasses.

Would you like additional information?

Additional information is available on-line. Please see [MSU Extension-Oakland County's publications](#) as well as [MSU Extension's Bulletin Office](#) on campus.

Contact our [Plant & Pest Hotline \(248/858-0902\)](#) for assistance with plant identification, pests and diseases, weeds, trees and shrubs, lawn, flowers, fruits, vegetables, grasses and groundcovers, native plants, plant propagation, and many other gardening topics.