

Tall fescue is a popular choice for Kansas lawns. It turns green early in the spring and maintains color late into the fall. It grows well under a variety of conditions — sunny or semi-shady and wet or dry. When seeded at the correct rate and managed properly, tall fescue makes an attractive lawn that holds up during Kansas summers.

Recommended Cultivars

Until recently, the same tall fescue cultivars were used for both pastures and lawns. Although pasture grasses such as K-31 remain popular, newer varieties sold as blends are recommended for superior quality and performance. Besides darker color, better density, and finer texture, these cultivars are better able to withstand heat, drought, disease, and wear. Check with your local K-State Research and Extension office for the latest recommendations.

Care and Management for Established Lawns

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Mowing | Turf-types: 2 to 3 inches. K-31: 2½ to 3½ inches. Raise height to the upper end of the range during the summer. |
| Fertilizing | September, November, May. |
| Watering | Spring: minimal. Summer: 1 to 1½ inches per week. Fall: only as needed to prevent wilting. |
| Planting | September or March through April, using 6 to 8 pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet. |
| Dandelions | Herbicides are most effective in the fall. |
| Crabgrass | Preemergence herbicide before redbud trees reach full bloom. |
| Grubs | Treat May through July depending on when grubs are present. |
| Aerating | Early spring or fall, as needed. |

Planting

Tall fescue lawns are usually planted from seed, but can also be installed as sod. September is the best time for planting. Seed germinates in four to seven days under favorable conditions. Planting too early increases susceptibility to heat stress and disease, but late plantings may be injured by cold winter temperatures. Spring seeding should be done in March or April to allow grass to become well established before hot weather. Seed germinates more slowly in the spring when the soil is cold. Weed competition is also greater in the spring.

Siduron (Tupersan) and mesotrione (Tenacity) are the only two preemergence crabgrass preventers that can be safely applied at seeding time. Apply only at the lowest label rate and expect establishment to be slightly reduced. Other crabgrass preventers should not be applied until after the grass has been mowed several times. As a general rule, avoid using broadleaf weed killers until the grass has been mowed three times. The label explains how to use a herbicide safely and effectively to minimize injury to newly seeded fescue. The best way to avoid weeds during establishment is to plant in mid-September.

The recommended seeding rate for home lawns is 6 to 8 pounds per 1,000 square feet, using good-quality seed and proper soil preparation and planting procedures. Seeding too lightly or poor technique may result in a thin, clumpy, and weedy stand. Heavy seeding can lead to overcrowding, poor rooting, and disease problems, which may eventually kill turf. Seeding either too light or too heavy weakens turf and offsets the advantages of planting tall fescue.

Tall Fescue Seeding Schedule (for new lawns)

| | |
|-----------|--|
| July | Test soil for pH, phosphorus, potash. Begin spraying bermudagrass or other perennial grassy weeds with Roundup or Finale. |
| August | Grade and till soil. Incorporate phosphorus, potassium, lime, or sulfur according to soil test. |
| September | Just before seeding, mix 1 pound of nitrogen (N) per 1,000 square feet into the soil surface, 1 or 2 inches. Smooth, and then seed lawn. Keep seedbed constantly moist until seedlings appear. |
| October | Fertilize with a half rate of nitrogen one month after planting. Water once a week if weather is dry. |
| November | Fertilize with 1 pound of soluble nitrogen. Soak soil thoroughly before winter. |

For details, see *Planting A Home Lawn*, MF-1126.

Overseeding

- Mow the lawn to 1½ inch height.
- Core aerate if the soil is compacted.
- Power rake, using spring tines or thin blades.
- Remove debris with hand rake or lawnmower and catcher.
- Sow seed uniformly. Use 6 to 8 pounds per 1,000 square feet if repairing large, dead areas. Use a half-rate (3 to 5 pounds) if trying to thicken a thin lawn.
- Fertilize with 1 pound nitrogen per 1,000 square feet.
- Water in the seed and fertilizer.
- Do not use crabgrass preventers, except siduron (Tupersan) or mesotrione (Tenacity), until grass is well established.

- Use broadleaf weed killers according to the label to prevent damage to tall fescue seedlings for one month before seeding or until the new grass has been mowed three times.

Mowing

Mowing too low or too infrequently are common causes of problems in tall fescue lawns. Tall fescue grows rapidly and requires frequent mowing. Spring mowing can be greatly reduced by following a fall fertilization program and not fertilizing in early spring. Tall fescue should be mowed frequently enough so that no more than one-third of the height is removed at one time. If the lawn is mowed often, it is not necessary to catch clippings. Clippings return nitrogen and other nutrients to the soil and do not cause thatch.

When to Mow (to remove one-third)

| If your mowing height is: | Mow when grass gets this tall: |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 2 inches | 3 inches |
| 2½ inches | 3¾ inches |
| 3 inches | 4½ inches |
| 3½ inches | 5¼ inches |

Turf-type cultivars of tall fescue can be mowed slightly lower than K-31, but should stay within the recommended range. Mow at the higher end of the range during the summer to promote deeper rooting and better drought resistance. Keep the blade sharp at all times or browned leaf tips will detract from turf appearance and reduce the health of the lawn.

Mowing Heights

| | |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| Turf-type cultivars | 2 to 3 inches |
| K-31 | 2½ to 3½ inches |

Watering

Fescue is relatively drought-tolerant, but it should be watered during the summer to keep it green. Unless the lawn begins to wilt, avoid watering in the spring. Spring watering reduces summer drought resistance and contributes to excessive growth, disease, and weeds. During dry summer weather water once or twice a week, applying a total of 1 to 1½ inches. Morning is best.

In the fall, water every other week if the weather is dry. A good soaking before winter is also helpful. Apply water at a rate that can be absorbed by the soil. Sprinklers vary in how fast they apply water. To check the application rate place several flat-bottomed, straight-sided containers on the lawn and turn the water for an hour. The average height, in inches, of water collected in the containers is the application rate in inches per hour. It tells how long to run the sprinkler to apply a given amount of water.

Avoid watering every day or even every other day, except for a newly seeded lawn. Besides wasting water, frequent watering leads to shallow roots, disease, and weeds. For more information, see *Watering Your Lawn*, MF-2059.

Fertilizing

September and November is the most important time to fertilize tall fescue lawns. Fertilizing in March or early April promotes

excessive growth that increases mowing and encourages disease and weeds. Delay fertilization until topgrowth slows in May. Then apply a slow-release nitrogen source, which keeps grass from growing too fast as hot weather approaches. Too much topgrowth prevents root growth needed to withstand summer stresses. If fertilizing only once a year, do it in September to thicken the lawn and promote root development. A November fertilizer application helps lawn stay green longer and encourages it to green up earlier in the spring.

Fertilizing Schedule

| | Nitrogen carrier | Amount* |
|-----------|------------------|------------|
| September | Soluble or Mixed | 1–1½ lb. N |
| November | Soluble | 1–1½ lb. N |
| May | Slow release | 1 lb. N |

*pounds of actual nitrogen (not product) per 1,000 square feet

Nitrogen is the most important fertilizer element and should be applied regularly. Apply phosphorous, potassium, lime, and sulfur only when indicated by soil test results. Phosphorus and potassium can be applied in September or May. For more information, see *Fertilizing Kansas Lawns*, MF-2324.

Thatch

Thatch, an accumulation of dead roots and stem tissue at the soil surface, is usually not a problem in properly managed tall fescue lawns. Fall fertilizing, regular mowing, and proper watering help to control thatch buildup. Grass clippings decompose and do not contribute significantly to thatch.

Thatch in old, spring fertilized lawns should be removed if it is more than a half-inch thick. Power-rake in September just before fertilizing or overseeding, using a machine with spring tines to avoid injury. Dethatching in late fall increases susceptibility to winter injury. Dethatching in the spring may encourage weeds.

Core Aerating

Clay soils and soils compacted from heavy use may benefit from aeration. Core aerating machines remove small plugs of soil and leave small holes in the ground that allow for better water, air and root penetration. Aerate in the spring or fall, or both, depending on soil compaction or clay content of the soil. In the spring, aerate before applying crabgrass preventers. In the fall it is best to aerate before overseeding. You can rent an aerator from a local nursery or rental agency or hire a professional.

Cores of soil brought to the surface during aeration should be left on the lawn. As they disintegrate, they fall back into the holes and help with decomposition of thatch.

Weed Control

A healthy tall fescue lawn is fairly resistant to weed infestation. Fall fertilizing, proper watering (especially avoiding overwatering in the spring), and proper mowing reduce weed infestations. Good cultural practices are less expensive than excessive use of herbicides. Do not depend on herbicides alone for weed control.

Good cultural practices are effective in reducing crabgrass and annual grass weeds. Crabgrass and other annual grassy weeds can be prevented by applying preemergent herbicide before redbud

trees reach full bloom or leaves begin to emerge. This typically occurs around April 15 (two weeks earlier for southeast Kansas and two weeks later for northwest Kansas), but weather conditions vary from year to year.

The best time to control broadleaf weeds such as dandelions, chickweed, and henbit is September and October. Spring herbicide applications are not as effective and do not provide lasting results. To prevent injury to newly seeded or established tall fescue lawns always follow label directions. See *Weed Control in Home Lawns*, MF-2385, for more information.

Disease

Although tall fescue is relatively disease-free, brown patch is the most common disease problem. The best way to prevent disease is to select recommended cultivars and follow cultural practices, especially watering guidelines, outlined in this publication. Fungicides are expensive and usually not necessary, except during severe outbreaks. Seeding too thickly, fertilizing in early spring, and shallow, frequent watering predispose tall fescue lawns to disease.

Insects

Small populations of both beneficial and harmful insects are normal in the lawn. Indiscriminate use of insecticides may de-

stroy beneficial insects and allow harmful species to predominate. A healthy, vigorous lawn can tolerate moderate levels of insects. Occasionally, when populations are sufficient to cause visible damage, homeowners may choose to apply insecticide.

Grubs are common insect pests of tall fescue lawns. Two types that cause damage are the southern masked chafer (annual grub) and the May/June beetle (three-year grub). The southern masked chafer is the most common and can be controlled by applying a preventive insecticide such as Oftanol, Dylox/Proxol, Sevin, or Diazinon, mid-July through early August. After mid-August insecticides are not as effective in controlling the southern masked chafer grub, although newer insecticides Merit and Mach 2 have longer residuals than other products.

For control of southern masked chafer Merit should be applied early June to mid-July rather than late July or early August. Apply Merit in late May or June if three-year grubs are the problem. One application should give season-long control for both types of grubs. Mach 2 does not last as long as Merit and should not be applied before late-June for control of annual grubs. For more on grub control, see *Annual White Grubs in Turf*, MF2635.

While not as common, sod webworms, cutworms, and other pests may also damage tall fescue lawns. These pests should be treated only when they are causing actual damage. Always read and follow label directions carefully when using pesticides.

Tall Fescue Lawn Calendar

| September | October | November |
|--|--|--|
| Most important time to fertilize. | Spray dandelions, chickweed and henbit in established lawns. | Fertilize established lawns a second time. |
| Plant new lawn, overseed thin lawns. | Fertilize newly seeded lawns at half rate. | Mow 2 to 2½ inches at last mowing. |
| Spray dandelions if not planting or overseeding. | | Soak soil before winter. |
| Water only as needed to prevent wilt. | | |
| Dethatch if needed. | | |
| Aerate soil if needed. | | |

| March | April | May |
|--|--|--|
| Avoid early spring fertilizing. | First mowing can be at 1½ inches to remove dead grass. | Third application of fertilizer; use a slow-release nitrogen source. |
| Spray broadleaf weeds if not planting or overseeding. | Regular mowing at recommended height. | Avoid frequent watering to reduce weed germination and disease. |
| Water only if weather is dry and lawn shows signs of wilt. | Mow frequently. Keep blade sharp. | |
| Aerate clay and compacted soils. | Apply crabgrass preventers by redbud bloom. | |

| June | July | August |
|--|---|---|
| Apply grub control if needed. | Apply grub control if needed. | Apply grub control if needed. |
| Check for summer broadleaf weeds, treat if necessary. | Fertilize newly seeded lawns at half rate. | Test soil before fall planting. |
| Raise mowing height to upper end of the range to promote drought resistance. | Water once or twice a week during hot, dry weather. | Prepare for fall planting. |
| Water only as needed to prevent wilt. | Kill bermudagrass if it is a problem. | Water once or twice a week, depending on weather. |
| Dethatch if needed. | Replant to tall fescue in September. | |
| Aerate soil if needed. | | |

Jared Hoyle, Turfgrass Specialist

Steve Keeley, Professor

Matthew Fagerness, Turfgrass Specialist

Publications from Kansas State University are available at www.ksre.ksu.edu.

Brand names appearing in this publication are for product identification purposes only. No endorsement is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products not mentioned. Publications are reviewed or revised annually by appropriate faculty to reflect current research and practice.

Date shown is that of publication or last revision. Contents of this publication may be freely reproduced for educational purposes.

All other rights reserved. In each case, credit Jared Hoyle et al., *Tall Fescue Lawns*, Kansas State University, April 2015.

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service

K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, as amended. Kansas State University, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts, and United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating, John D. Floros, Director.

April 2015