ALABAMA COOPERATIVE Extension SYSTEM

ALABAMA A&M AND AUBURN UNIVERSITIES

ANR-231

# Tall Fescue Lawns



Tall fescue is a cool-season, perennial, bunch-type grass for North Alabama lawns. It is desirable for its coarse to medium texture, dark green color, and its ability to establish from seed. It does not have the heat or drought tolerance of warm-season grasses, but for those in the northern part of the state, it is a popular choice.

## Description

Cool-season grasses, such as tall fescue, grow best in daytime temperatures between 60 and 75 °F. In the middle of the summer, tall fescue will be under heat stress in Alabama. The northern part of the state is the southern limit of tall fescue's zone of adaptation. Because of this, in especially hot or droughty summers, tall fescue lawns will suffer considerable damage and become thin and patchy. Even in a normal summer, some thinning of a fescue lawn may occur. It is a common practice to maintain the desired density of tall fescue lawns in the Deep South by sowing additional seed each fall in order to compensate for this.

Tall fescue withstands droughty conditions and moderate wear better than other cool-season grasses. However, tall fescue's drought and wear tolerance is **not** comparable to warm-season grasses such as bermudagrass and zoysiagrass. Tall fescue tolerates light to moderate shade, but performs best in full sun. Although tall fescue grows best in well-drained soils of moderate fertility, with a pH of 5.5 – 6.5, it adapts to a wide variety of soil conditions.

Kentucky-31 (K-31) is the oldest and most common cultivar of tall fescue. Newer cultivars, referred to as turf-type tall fescues, have finer texture, shorter growth habit, darker color, and greater density and shade tolerance than K-31. Several of these turf-types are also more disease resistant and more resilient in summer stress. With any tall fescue selection, the bunching growth and summer stress will mean reseeding thinned areas periodically.

## Varieties

Several tall fescue varieties are on the market. Kentucky 31 is still a dependable tall fescue turfgrass, tolerating our summers with proper irrigation management. It is the coarsest-textured tall fescue variety. There are also many newer cultivars available: Dynasty, Plantation, Falcon IV, Rebel Exeda, Van Gogh, Rhambler, Mustang IV, and Monet are just some of the varieties that have been released in recent years. These new cultivars have more dense growth and a finer texture.

In practice, the turf-type tall fescues are often sold as blends of several varieties. Often, the exact varieties in certain brand name blends will change from year to year as seed availability varies and as new varieties are released and old ones are discontinued.

## Establishment

**Soil Preparation.** Ease of establishment from seed is a major contributor to the popularity of tall fescue. For greatest success, good soil preparation is essential.

1. First, take a soil sample (see ANR-6) and submit it to the Soil Testing Lab for pH and fertility recommendations.
2. Before adding amendments, remove hard-to-control weeds such as nutsedge or bermudagrass.
3. For best results, mow a week before herbicide treatment.




4. Then spray the area with a nonselective herbicide such as glyphosate (Roundup) to remove the competitive weeds.
5. After weeds are eliminated, broadcast organic amendments, lime, potassium, and phosphorus according to soil test recommendations, and work into the seedbed to a depth of 6 to 8 inches.
6. Hand rake the area removing debris and smoothing the soil surface. Buried stumps or other organic material will eventually decay, leaving a hole in the soil. Maintenance is much easier on a consistently even turf surface than on one that is irregular. Rolling the seedbed smooth helps as long as the surface is fairly dry and the subsurface is moist. Avoid excessive rolling.

**Seeding.** September to October is the best time to plant tall fescue. This gives plenty of time for strong root system establishment before the stress of summer heat. Planting in the spring, requires special attention, often large amounts of water, and increases the chance for seedling disease (damping off). Seedlings may not fully establish before winter if planted after October into late fall.

Spread seed at a rate of 5 to 8 pounds per 1,000 $ft^2$ with a mechanical spreader. Higher rates may decrease ease of lawn establishment and increase disease problems. Uniform distribution of the seed is important to appearance and later maintenance.

1. Divide the seed into two equal amounts.
2. Sow half in one direction over the total area to be seeded.
3. Then sow the other half at a right angle to the first.
4. After seeding, lightly rake or drag the area.
5. Then lightly roll the seedbed ensuring seed-to-soil contact. Do not bury the seeds.

Mulch, such as pine straw, helps prevent washing, retains moisture, and results in quick and uniform germination. Other straw mulches can contain weeds and competing cool-season grasses and should be used only if clean. Commercial netting can be used on slopes to help prevent soil and seed movement during irrigation and rain.

**Irrigation.** At the time of seeding, the prepared soil should have good moisture in the top 4 to 6 inches, but the surface should be dry enough for the seeding operation.

Surface drought is a major cause of seedling failure. After seeding, ensure surface moisture until germination. This usually requires light irrigation one to three times each day for 2 to 3 weeks. As the seedlings develop, apply water frequently enough to prevent wilting, but gradually decrease the frequency and increase water amount to encourage a deeper root system. The goal is to irrigate the mature lawn only once or twice per week.

Overirrigation is the single biggest mistake homeowners make in caring for their lawns. Too much surface moisture increases the chance of damping off (seedling disease). Applying water too fast erodes the soil surface and moves the seed. To maintain the appearance and long-term health of a lawn, water deeply and infrequently. An average lawn uses one to 1 ½ inches of water each week in the middle of the summer when fully established, and less in the spring and fall. Be sure to take rainfall into account when deciding how often to irrigate. There is no need to irrigate if natural rainfall is supplying this much water.

**Mowing.** Begin mowing seedlings at 2 to 2 ½ inches once the entire stand is about 2 ½ inches tall. Do not mow when wet.

## Maintenance

**Fertilizing.** Do not fertilize tall fescue lawns in the same manner as warm-season grasses. Tall fescue tolerates low fertility, but looks best with 2 to 4 pounds of nitrogen per 1000 $ft^2$ per year. The majority of fertilizer should be applied to tall fescue lawns in the fall.

Supply phosphorus and potassium only in accordance with a soil test recommendation. If your soil test indicates that you do not need phosphorous and potassium, there is no need to use a complete fertilizer. You can apply nitrogen only.

Apply about 1 pound of nitrogen per 1000 $ft^2$ in late September, October, and November. Apply ½ pound of nitrogen around the first of March and April if you see that additional nitrogen is necessary. If you use a slow-release nitrogen fertilizer, apply 3 pounds of nitrogen in September and two in early March. Overfertilizing in summer can compound heat and drought stress.

**Irrigation.** Proper irrigation management is essential to the durability of a fescue lawn. Irrigate when signs of moisture stress appear—grey color, wilted or rolled leaves. Then water to a depth of 4 to 8 inches. This is generally 1 inch of water per week. Early morning is the best time to irrigate. In the middle of the summer, 1 ½ inches of water per week may be necessary.

**Mowing.** Mow tall fescue at 2 to 3 inches. One mowing per week is normally sufficient; however, during the spring you may need to mow two times per week to maintain high turf quality. The general rule of thumb is to remove no more than one-third of the leaf material in one mowing. For example, if the height of the cut is 2 inches, mow before growth reaches 3 inches.

**Reseeding.** Because of summer stress, tall fescue lawns eventually become thin. Reseeding is often necessary to maintain a dense lawn. Turf thinning occurs more rapidly in cases of improper management like improper irrigation, too much nitrogen fertilizer, excessive seeding rates, improper mowing height, and seeding in late fall or spring. Additional stresses may include drought, pests, or environmental conditions like compacted soil or nearby tree competition.

When it is time to reseed, estimate the loss percentage and multiply that number by the establishment seeding rate. For example, if the lawn is 50 percent dead, reseed with 50 percent x 5 pounds = 2 ½ pounds per 1,000 square feet. Remember to reseed in fall just as recommended for establishment.

Seed-to-soil contact is necessary for successful reseeding. Hand rake thin areas with an iron rake, or rent a power rake, vertical mower, or core aerifier. If an area is completely bare, follow establishment procedures.

**Weeds.** A healthy and dense turf provides the best defense against weed invasion. However, due to the bunch growth habit of tall fescue, this is difficult to achieve. The newer turf-type tall fescues have a more dense growth, but will still benefit from chemical weed control.

Some herbicide application will be necessary for proper tall fescue lawn maintenance. Control of broadleaf weeds, such as dandelion and plantain, can be achieved with applications of broadleaf specific herbicides. Crabgrass is easier to control with a spring application of pre-emergence herbicides, but repeated summer applications of postemergence crabgrass control materials can also manage it. See IPM-590 for home lawn weed control recommendations.

**Insects.** As with other turfgrasses, several insects can become pests. Before applying any pesticide, make positive identification of the insect causing the damage. This ensures that an accurate control is applied and means less follow-up treatments. Your local county Extension office can assist you with this identification.

**Diseases.** Kentucky 31 tall fescue is relatively resistant to most common turfgrass diseases. Some of the new turf-type cultivars are even more resistant. The best disease management tools are proper irrigation and fertilizer routines. Excess nitrogen, prolonged drought, or prolonged saturation can contribute to disease development.

Brown patch is the most destructive disease in tall fescue, but it can be controlled with repeated applications of a lawn fungicide. (See ANR-500: *Home Lawns, Insect, Disease, Nematode, and Weed Control* for recommendations.) Again, proper identification of the disease is necessary for a more accurate control method.



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**For more information,** call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

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