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Reseeding your cool season grass

If you have a cool season grass in your lawn, such as tall fescue or Kentucky bluegrass, you may be wondering when and how to overseed your lawn this fall. There are several key things to consider for a successful overseeding of your lawn: timing, soil, seeds, and moisture.

Normally for a cool season grass, it is recommended that you oversee early to mid-September. However, our hot weather may have deterred you from starting the overseeding process. Cool season grass, as the name suggests, does not thrive in high temperatures. If you already put down seed, be sure to water often. If you have not yet overseeded the lawn, wait until the hot weather subsides. This may mean overseeding in mid to late September.

The next concern is your soil. While you need good seed to soil contact, the seed only needs to be 1/8 to 1/4 inch deep. A rake is usually sufficient to disturb the soil enough for overseeding. If the soil is compacted, consider aerating the soil before germinating. This is best done with a core aerator that pulls plugs of soil out of the ground. This will also help create better seed to soil contact.

You will also want to ensure that the soil has adequate nutrient levels, specifically for nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. If you have not done a soil test within the last few years, you can test for these nutrients through your local extension office. If your lawn is not routinely fertilized, it is usually safe to assume that you need more of all three nutrients. You can use a lawn starter fertilizer and apply at the rates the fertilizer suggests on the label. If your lawn has sufficient phosphorus and potassium, you will still want to add nitrogen. A slow-release nitrogen fertilizer is best to lower the risk of burning young, tender grass.

Once you have the soil and timing right, you need to put down seed at the proper rate. For tall fescue, use around 6-8 pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet for establishing a new lawn. If you are using Kentucky bluegrass, aim for closer to 3 pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet. For overseeding a thin lawn, use about half those rates. Adding too much seed results in overcrowding, which leads to a lawn that is more susceptible to disease and pest damage.

After seeding, it is critical that the lawn have sufficient water for germination. In hot weather, it may need watering two to three times a day to promote better germination rates. This moisture is critical as the grass germinates. Newly germinated grass should also not dry out until the seedlings establish more robust root systems. If you do not know if your newly sprouted grass needs water, you can do a simple test. Push down on the grass and see if the blades spring back up quickly. If they do not, the lawn needs water.

If you have any questions about this process, reach out to your local extension office for more information.