

How to Start a Decent Lawn

By Susan Camp

A friend recently asked, “How would a person go about trying to get a decent front lawn where there is nothing, not even wiregrass, to cover the hardpan?”

Ah, that’s a tough question to answer. It’s tough because there are so many variables involved in cultivating some sort of green groundcover over the typical local combination of sandy and clay soil that doesn’t like to grow anything except weeds and wiregrass (more on wiregrass, later).

If you want to grow something green and attractive on a bare stretch of ground, start preparing the soil several months before planting time by obtaining a soil test kit from your local Extension Office. In Gloucester, call (804) 693-2602 for information on soil testing.

Follow the test kit instructions to obtain an appropriate sample, which you will send to Virginia Tech for testing. The results will give you specific information about the condition of your soil and the nutrients needed to improve its fertility.

Most Middle Peninsula soils are acidic with a pH below 6.0, and most turfgrasses require a pH between 6.0 and 7.0, so depending on the test results and the type of grass you hope to grow, you will need to “sweeten” the soil with lime to raise the pH to the appropriate level.

If the existing soil is primarily sand or clay, you will need to add a 2:1 mixture of topsoil and compost to increase the soil depth to 4 to 6 inches. See Chapter 2 “Lawns” in “Home Gardening in Gloucester” on the Gloucester Extension Master Gardeners website at gemg.org/results-alt for detailed information on establishing a lawn.

Both warm and cool season turfgrasses will grow on the Middle Peninsula. Warm season grasses are hardier in our summer heat but turn brown with the first hard frost; new green shoots will sprout in the spring. Cool season grasses remain green during the winter, but require shade and frequent irrigation to survive our hot summers.

The types of warm season turfgrasses that grow well in Eastern Virginia include zoysia and Bermudagrass (*Cynodon dactylon*), which is synonymous with wiregrass. Yes, the despised wiregrass that invades your perennial and vegetable beds is identical to the Bermuda you admire in parks and golf courses.

A native of Africa and not Bermuda, wiregrass is a perennial that thrives in our hot, humid summer weather. Usually planted as sprigs or plugs, wiregrass spreads both by rhizomes, which are underground horizontal stems, and by stolons, aboveground horizontal stems that root at intervals. In undisturbed soil, the rhizomes remain 1 to 6 inches below the surface, but if the ground is tilled, the roots will submerge deeper underground. In addition, cut stems will root in moist soil. Eventually, the stolons will grow together to form a tangled, wiry mat that is almost impossible to remove. Wiregrass also grows from seed, and sterile Bermudagrass hybrids are

available for lawns. Wiregrass needs full sun and also requires irrigation during the summer; the stolons will dry out if deprived of water.

Zoysia is a slow-growing Asian native that is cultivated from sprigs, plugs, or sod and spreads underground by rhizomes. It is shade tolerant and handles foot traffic well. Like Bermudagrass, zoysia turns brown in winter. Zoysia's main drawback is its slow rate of growth.

Plant zoysia and Bermudagrass in May or June. Both are salt and drought tolerant.

The best cool season grass for our region is tall fescue, which may remain green year-round in Gloucester, although its best growth period is from mid-September to early June. Plant tall fescue seed in September. This turfgrass requires frequent watering for seeds to germinate. A light cover of weed-free straw helps to maintain a consistent moisture level and prevent dispersal of seeds by wind and water. The straw also protects tasty seeds from hungry birds.

Future columns will focus on turfgrass alternatives, including lawn reduction, native grasses and groundcovers, and clover lawns.