Establishing a New Lawn

University of Idaho Extension
1808 N. 3rd Street
Coeur d'Alene, Idaho 83814

Phone: (208) 446-1680
FAX: (208) 446-1690
E-mail: kootenai@uidaho.edu
Web: extension.uidaho.edu/kootenai

IDAHO MASTER GARDENER
UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO EXTENSION

Dorothy Keinke
Former Master Gardener Program Coordinator

From seed - Begin with an area that is free of weeds. (This can be accomplished by the use of herbicides, or one deep tilling followed by two shallow tillings when weeds have re-emerged). Prepare the seedbed by raking smooth and sloping slightly away from the house. Remove rocks, sticks and dirt clods from the area to be planted. If topsoil is brought in, rake smooth and incorporate the two soil profiles together by roto-tilling. (Use caution when purchasing topsoil. Some may contain debris, toxic salts, noxious weeds or roots of undesirable plants). Tilling the two types of soil together will improve the drainage and decrease lawn diseases caused by a perched water table. This is also a good time to incorporate fertilizer into the seedbed, based on soil test results. Seeding can be done in the spring after soil temperatures reach a minimum of 50 degrees F. Seeding in late summer, early fall is also acceptable. It is not recommended to plant grass seed after mid-September in our area, as the grass may not have time to crown-out before freezing weather occurs.

Choose a quality grass seed mix consisting of bluegrass, perennial rye grass and fescue. (Sow fescue seed heavier in shaded areas). Some experts recommend using only bluegrass and perennial rye grass seed in sunny locations. (Read the label carefully; a good quality seed will contain less than 4% of anything other than the desired grass seed. Also note the germination rate designated on the label. The higher the percentage of live seed, the better). Begin by moistening the soil. Apply the seed, using an appropriate spreader, either hand or wheeled, approximately 3 lbs of seed per l,000 square feet of lawn. To ensure more even seed distribution, divide the seed into two parts. Distribute one part of the seed by walking back and forth in one direction. Then seed the second part at right angles to the first seeding. Now roll the newly seeded area with a roller to ensure the good seed to soil contact necessary for germination. Rollers are available for rent at local garden centers and 'u-rent' businesses. After rolling, cover the seed with a light covering of moistened peat moss* or weed free straw. (There is no need to rake the straw off later if applied lightly). This will provide moisture and shade for the newly germinating plants, and protect from birds. Water twice daily for two weeks, more often if the weather turns hot. **Do not allow germinating seeds to dry out!** You should be ready to mow in approximately three weeks.

*It is necessary to moisten peat moss before distribution so it doesn't blow away, or siphon moisture away from the germinating plants. Cut an 'X' in the side of the bag and squirt a little dish soap into the bag to make the peat more absorbent. Apply water slowly, using a garden hose. If water is applied too rapidly the peat moss will float to the top and out of the bag. You can also moisten the peat moss in a wheel borrow. Follow the procedure above.

Using sod - Laying sod is hard work, you may want to enlist the help of a friend. It is also more costly than starting a lawn from seed. However, it provides an instant lawn that is very gratifying. Prepare the soil in the same manner as described for seeding the lawn. The final level should be an inch or two lower than the grade to accommodate the thickness of the sod. Arrange ahead of time to pick up or have your sod delivered to maximize freshness. For optimal results sod should be installed within 24 hours of harvesting*. Reject any sod that shows sign of drying out around the edges or other evidence of stress. Soil should be moist, but not soggy. This is accomplished by watering a few days prior to the scheduled installation and not watering heavily the night before.

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Start laying the sod along a straight edge, such as sidewalk or driveway. To create a straight edge, stretch a string through the center of the lawn. When laying the sod, kneel on a piece of plywood so you don't disturb the soil or damage the sod. Use kneepads to protect your knees. Position the sod pieces so that they butt tightly up to one another, but do not overlap. Stagger the pieces, brick style, as you move from row to row, so the ends don't all line up evenly. Use an old kitchen knife or other sharp object to cut sod to fit around sprinklers and other odd shaped areas. Fill any large spaces between pieces of sod with soil. Use a roller, about 1/3 full of water over the entire area to ensure good sod to soil contact, and to help level the area. Water thoroughly so the soil is moist to a depth of 6-8inches. Water twice a day for two weeks until the roots knit with the soil below. Water more often if weather turns hot. Soil should be kept moist, but not soggy. *If you can't install your sod immediately, spread it out on the ground and keep well-watered. Do not leave the sod on pallets for more than 48 hours. Even then, keep it moist and shaded to minimize stress. Sod can be installed later into the fall than what is recommended for seeding.

Hydro seeding – Prepare the soil as directed above for seeding. The actual hydro seeding is usually done by a professional. Ask for credentials! Most reputable contractors are licensed, bonded and insured. Find out if and how the tank and sprayer are cleaned between clients to avoid undesirable seeds in your new lawn. Ask for a list of the variety of seed that will be applied, and do not allow any 'quick green-up' annual seeds, such as annual bluegrass, that can later develop into a lawn weed problem. Annual rye is frequently used and is acceptable. Ask to see other job sites and speak to other clients.

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