

# GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR LAWN MAINTENANCE IN MARYLAND



University of Maryland  
Turfgrass Technical Update  
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Once the lawn has been established there are regular management practices that must be followed to ensure lawn quality. This publication is intended to provide a quick reference to general lawn management principles. In addition to basic guidelines, this publication is a reference source for more detailed information on specific subjects.

By following the principles outlined here, many potential problems can be avoided. The most common causes of poor lawns include:

- \* Poorly adapted species or cultivar(s) were planted
- \* Improper time of planting seed
- \* Improper use of fertilizers and limestone
- \* Poor watering practices or poorly drained soils
- \* Too much traffic or compaction of soil
- \* Mowing the lawn too closely or too infrequently
- \* Failure to replant areas damaged by pests or stress

## Turfgrass Species and Cultivars

Information about species and cultivars suitable for Maryland is provided in "TT-77: Turfgrass Cultivar Recommendations For Maryland". This and other Turfgrass Technical Updates can be found at [www.md turf council.org](http://www.md turf council.org) or [www.turf.umd.edu](http://www.turf.umd.edu).

In general, tall fescue is the lawn grass best adapted for Maryland's soils and climate. Kentucky bluegrass provides the most aesthetically pleasing lawn turf, but it requires a higher level of maintenance than tall fescue. Perennial ryegrass cultivars have been improved in recent years, but this species is not recommended for use on lawns due to its susceptibility to many diseases. Fine leaf fescues (i.e., creeping red, Chewings, sheep and hard fescue) perform well in acid soils and moderate shade, but don't tolerate low mowing in summer (See "TT-41: Establishing and Maintaining Fine Leaf Fescues For Low Maintenance Sites"). Zoysiagrass is perhaps our best low maintenance grass for lawns, but it is slow and expensive to establish (see "TT-69: Planting and Care of a Zoysiagrass Lawn"). Bermudagrass is best



Tall fescue is the preferred grass for Maryland lawns.

- \* Too much shade
- \* Poor weed control practices
- \* Uncertified seed or sod were used

adapted to Southern and Eastern Shore Maryland, and is susceptible to winter kill.

Zoysiagrass and bermudagrass can be established from seed or vegetatively. Plant the aforementioned grasses in either May or June for best results. The best time of year to seed or overseed damaged areas of tall fescue and the other cool-season grasses is late August and September.

### KEY POINTS

**Tall fescue is the best all-purpose turf species for Maryland.**

**September is the best time to plant tall fescue seed.**

**Seed mixes that contain annual ryegrass or perennial ryegrass are not recommended.**

**Proper mowing, nitrogen fertility and weed control are the most important needs for healthy turf maintenance**

Spring seedings of cool season grasses are fraught with problems and should not be attempted on a large scale without knowledge of appropriate herbicides. Winter or dormant seeding only is recommended for Kentucky bluegrass. All other species of seeds will die over winter.

### Mowing

Low and infrequent mowing are perhaps the major causes of lawn deterioration. When mowing, never remove more than one-third of the leaf surface at

any one time. For example, if the desired mowing height is 2.0 inches, do not allow the turf to grow higher than 3.0 inches before mowing.

It is best to maintain the mowing heights shown below for spring and autumn year round; however, height of cut can be reduced during autumn and winter. Mow as needed, but avoid mowing too low.

The proper mowing heights for lawn grasses are as follows:

Lawn grass	Spring and Summer	Autumn and Winter
Kentucky bluegrass	2.5 -3.0 inches	2.0 inches
Perennial ryegrass	2.5 -3.0 inches	2.0 inches
Tall fescue	2.5 -3.5 inches	2.5 inches
Fine leaf fescue	3.0 -4.0 inches	3.0 inches
Zoysiagrass	0.5 -1.0 inches	0.5 -1.5 inches
Bermudagrass	0.75 – 1.25 inches	0.75 – 1.5 inches

### Fertilizer and Limestone

Fertilize zoysiagrass 0 to 2 times and bermudagrass 2 to 3 times during the late spring and early summer. Kentucky bluegrass, tall fescue, perennial ryegrass and fine fescue should be fertilized with 75 to 100% of their annual needs in 1 to 3 applications during the autumn and early winter. Never apply fertilizer anytime soils are frozen or excessively wet.

The MD Lawn Fertilizer Bill enacted in 2011 by the General Assembly requires at least 20% of nitrogen (N) in fertilizer be slow release N fertilizers such as sulfur or poly-coated urea, methylene urea

or natural organic products. Water soluble materials such as urea and ammonium nitrate are good performers and less expensive, but they acidify soil more rapidly and provide a shorter-lived greening response. Established turfgrasses often require only nitrogen fertilizer. Soil tests should be completed to determine the need for phosphorus and potassium (potash) fertilizers, which often are needed in small amounts or not at all. Fertilizers are identified on the bag by three numbers (eg. 10-10-10), which correspond to a percent by weight of N + P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>+ K<sub>2</sub>O contained in the bag. There is some flexibility, but a good schedule for nitrogen fertilizer applications are shown below:

Pounds of nitrogen fertilizer per 1000ft<sup>2</sup> by month

	<u>Sept.</u>	<u>Oct.</u>	<u>Nov.</u>	<u>Mid-May</u>	<u>June</u>	<u>July</u>	<u>Annual total</u>
Kentucky bluegrass	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9*	0	0	2.7 – 3.6
Perennial ryegrass	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9*	0	0	2.7 – 3.6
Tall fescue	0.9	0.9	0	0.9*	0	0	1.8 – 2.7
Fine leaf fescue	0	0.9*	0	0.9*	0	0	0.0 – 1.8
Zoysiagrass	0	0	0	0.9*	0.9*	0	0.0 – 1.8
Bermudagrass	0	0	0	0.9	0.9	0.9*	1.8 – 2.7

\*Apply only if turf has poor color, density or vigor

Ground agricultural limestone should be applied when a soil test shows a pH lower than 6.0. For most lawns, apply 50 lbs of limestone per 1000 ft<sup>2</sup> of lawn in autumn or winter every 3 to 4 years. Limestone works slowly and may take many months to reach its full effect. Burnt, liquid or hydrated limes should not be used on turfgrasses.

### **Watering**

The best time to water the lawn is during early morning hours on an as needed basis rather than on a fixed schedule. Water is most effectively applied when turf develops a blue-gray or purplish color and/or when turf lays-down, leaving a footprint after being walked upon. When watering, it is very important to water slowly and to wet the soil to a depth of 4 to 6 inches. This can be a laborious process, but will yield long-term benefits in water conservation. Light and frequent applications of water are detrimental causing restricted rooting and increases in disease and weed problems, which results in poor turf quality and weak turfgrasses. For more information on watering consult "TT-62: Irrigation and Water Conservation on Home Lawns."

### **Weed, Disease, and Insect Pests**

Maintaining a thick, dense lawn through proper mowing, fertilizing and watering is the best approach to weed control. Despite adherence to sound cultural practices, however, crabgrass and broadleaf weeds often become troublesome. Crabgrass is best controlled with a preemergence herbicide (see "TT-43: Herbicides For Crabgrass and Goosegrass Control") before weed seed germinate in the spring. For Central and Southern Maryland, these herbicides should be applied between March 15 and April 1, and for Northern and Western Maryland they should be applied between April 1 and April 15.

Herbicides for broadleaf weed control (see "TT-49: Broadleaf Weed Control in Established Lawns") are most effective if applied in May or mid-September when weeds are growing vigorously. Always read pesticide labels carefully. There are many guides available to assist homeowners with insect, weed, and disease identification. Often it is best to take samples of injured turf, insects, or weeds to the Home & Garden Information Center for a more precise diagnosis, and they will provide guidance for dealing with the pests. The phone number for the Home & Garden Information Center in Maryland is 800-342-2507 and their website is [www.hgic.umd.edu](http://www.hgic.umd.edu).

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