

Turfgrass Basics

Taking care of your home lawn properly can lead to healthy, thick turfgrass that outcompetes weeds and recovers from disease or damage from pests, drought, or wear. One important lawn care decision is to choose the right turfgrass species for your lawn's growing conditions.

How Grasses Grow

The way turfgrass spreads (called its growth habit) can affect the plant's ability to recover from damage. There are two types of growth habits: bunch-type and spreading-type.

- » Bunch-type turfgrasses, like perennial ryegrass, grow outward from clumps and will not spread to fill in bare spots quickly.
- » Spreading-type turfgrasses, like Kentucky bluegrass or bermudagrass, are most often used in sod. These turfgrasses spread to fill in damaged areas rapidly through the production of underground stems called rhizomes or above ground stems called stolons.

There are two types of plant life cycles. Annual grass species complete their life cycle in one growing season, while perennial species grow for several seasons. Be informed about the life cycle of your selected turfgrass and choose a perennial species for your home lawn.

Where Grasses Grow Best

Turfgrasses are grouped based on how well they grow under certain environmental conditions like temperature and rainfall. Be aware of your climate and the turfgrasses recommended for your region.

- »  **Cool-Season** grasses thrive in cool, humid climate regions. They grow best in the spring and fall and have a longer green period during cooler weather.
- » A  **Transition Zone** is located between the cool and warm regions. Here, there are hot, humid summers and cold winters making it hard for either cool-season or warm-season grasses to thrive.
- »  **Warm-Season** grasses thrive in warm, humid climate regions. They grow the best in the summer and appear brown in cooler weather.

Take Action

Choosing the right plant for the right place is an important gardening decision, and selecting the turfgrass species best suited to your home lawn is no different. It is important to consider a variety of factors when choosing turfgrass species:

- » Growing conditions, including climate and amount of sunlight.
- » How you plan to use your lawn.
- » The level of maintenance you plan to put into caring for your lawn.

It is also recommended to use different mixtures and blends of turfgrass species and cultivars. This diversity will allow turfgrass to better withstand varied growing conditions, stress, and pests.

To learn more about research and extension related to choosing the right turfgrass for your lawn, please visit

LawnToLakeMidwest.org/RPRP

¹⁻⁷For references, visit iiseagrant.org/selecting-turfgrass

This information brought to you by Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant. Developed by Janice Milanovich and Allison Neubauer, edited by Hope Charters, and designed by Joel Davenport. Produced by Allison Neubauer and Sarah Zack.

Thank you to the following for their expert review: Richard Hentschel, University of Illinois Extension; Rebecca Koetz and John Orick, Purdue Extension; Dr. Tom Voigt, University of Illinois

This publication was made possible through funding by University of Illinois Extension and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.



Illinois Extension
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN



Forestry and Natural Resources

IISG20-RCE-BRC-044



RIGHT PLANT RIGHT PLACE

SELECTING TURFGRASS SPECIES

for Homeowners



LAWN TO LAKE *midwest*

Know Your Growing Conditions

It takes time and effort to find the right turfgrass species for your yard, but the investment can lead to a healthy lawn. Use this checklist to take a closer look at your property.

What turfgrasses grow best in my area?



Tall fescue, a cool-season turfgrass with good heat and drought tolerance, or zoysiagrass, a cold-tolerant, warm-season turfgrass, is recommended in the transition zone.^{1,2}

How much sun does my lawn receive?

- ☐ 6+ hours of sunlight
- ☐ 4-6 hours of sunlight
- ☐ 4 or less hours of sunlight

Grass does not grow well in dense shade. If you have a heavily shaded yard with less than 4 hours of sunlight, consider shade-loving ground covers, mulch, or establishing a perennial shade garden.^{3,4}

What level of maintenance (water, fertilizer, mowing) will my lawn receive?

- ☐ High
- ☐ Low

If you are looking for a low-maintenance lawn, consider a fine fescue species mix.^{5, 6}

What is my lawn's biggest problem?

- ☐ Wear/Traffic
- ☐ Drought
- ☐ Shade
- ☐ Disease

Cool-season grass species in order of most salt-tolerant to least are perennial ryegrass, tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass, and hard fescue.⁷

Turfgrass Selection Guide

Turfgrass species vary in texture, color, and growth habits. Many species have cultivars that will grow best in your region and meet your lawn's needs. Check with your local Extension office for specific mixture and cultivar recommendations.

Grass Species	Growing Season	Sunlight	Planting Method	Damage Recovery	Wear/Traffic Tolerance	Maintenance (water, fertilizer, mowing)	Drought Tolerance	Disease Potential ***
Kentucky Bluegrass	Cool-Season	6+	Seed or Sod	High	Medium	High	X	High
Perennial Ryegrass*	Cool-Season	6+	Seed	Low	High	Medium	X	Low
Turf-type Tall Fescue	Cool-Season Transition Zone	4-6	Seed or Sod	Low	High	Medium	✓	Low
Fine Fescues**	Cool-Season	>4	Seed	Low/Medium	Medium	Low	✓	Medium
Bermudagrass	Transition Zone Warm-Season	6+	Seed, Sod, Sprig/Plug	High	High	Medium	✓	Medium
Zoysiagrass	Transition Zone Warm-Season	4-6	Sod, Sprig/Plug	Medium/High	High	Low	✓	Medium

*Perennial ryegrass is usually mixed with Kentucky bluegrass.

**Fine fescue species generalized in this table include Chewings fescue, hard fescue, and creeping red fescue.

***Risk of infection from fungal pests (e.g., dollar spot, red thread, turfgrass rust, snow mold)

Turfgrass Terminology

- A **seed mix** is a combination of more than one turfgrass species in the same bag (e.g., Kentucky bluegrass mixed with turf-type tall fescue).
- A **cultivar** is a subset of a species that is bred for desired characteristics.
- A **seed blend** contains several cultivars of the same species.