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Starting a Lawn

Fact Sheet



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Starting a Lawn

If you're like most people, you enjoy having a healthy-looking lawn, even with all the work involved. Besides being a great place to spend time, lawns serve many functions, such as filtering pollution, buffering temperatures, absorbing water and preventing soil erosion.

Ideal conditions for growing a lawn include:

- even ground with a gentle slope and no low spots
- deep, fertile, well-aerated loamy soil with ample organic matter, good drainage and a slightly acidic pH (6.0 to 6.5).
- regular supply of water.
- Minimum of 6 hours of sunshine per day.
- optimum air temperature of 16 to 24°C.
- moderate foot traffic.

You will probably not have these ideal conditions at all times, so you should have realistic expectations about the appearance of your lawn.

Taking an environmentally friendly approach to lawn care starts with being practical about how you want your lawn to look.



Planning the New Lawn

Site Assessment

Do a site assessment to determine what factors will need to be considered and what improvements to include in your course of action. First consider how you intend to use your lawn, e.g. as a play area, then check the following:

- depth of the topsoil
- soil type, fertility, pH and organic matter content
- what insects, diseases or weeds are already present

You will also want to check if:

- water drains well from the site
- there are any steep slopes
- there are any shady areas with less than 6 hours of sunshine

Also understand how temperature, sunlight and rainfall conditions affect your site.

Your local garden centre can tell you about your region's climate and how it influences growing conditions.

Prevention is the best approach for managing any potential pest problem. Your plan should include:

- long-term changes, such as improving drainage in wet areas or replacing grass in problem areas with other types of landscaping
- providing good soil with ample depth and organic matter
- choosing the right mixture of grasses for the conditions and
- correctly identifying any problems

Be realistic when deciding to make any changes.

Getting Started

Site and soil preparation is an important step for establishing a healthy lawn. Before adding topsoil:

- Clear the soil of any debris—branches, concrete, plastics, large stones, etc.
- Loosen the existing soil if it is compacted.
- Correct the grade in areas that do not drain properly.

If your house is new, heavy equipment may have compacted the subsoil in your yard. Grass requires 10 to 20 cm (4 to 8 inches) of good quality topsoil to grow well.

- Work the new topsoil into the compacted layer to prevent potential drainage problems. A rototiller can be very helpful for this.

Add any required amendments to the soil to establish adequate growing conditions.

- Compost and peat moss add organic matter to the soil and tend to acidify your soil if added often or in large quantities.
- Compost acts as a fertilizer.
- Lime increases soil pH, and sulphur decreases it.

Spread some starter fertilizer on your lawn. Starter fertilizer is high in phosphorus, which stimulates the growth and development of turfgrass roots. Check your soil analysis results and ask for advice at

your garden centre. Firm up the soil with light rolling so that only light footprints appear when you walk on it.

Which Grass?

Lawns in Canada consist mostly of cool season turfgrass, which have their main growth periods in the spring and fall.

- Kentucky bluegrass requires more sun, especially morning sun, than many other grasses.
- Fine fescues are more shade tolerant and will do well on sites with only 4 to 6 hours of sunlight per day or only late day sunlight.
- Ryegrass has very good tolerance to wear and is suitable for sport or play areas.
- Bentgrass species are not suitable for most home lawn situations because they require high maintenance.
- Some cool season grass varieties (e.g. tall fescues, fine fescues, perennial ryegrass) may contain beneficial fungi called endophytes and may be more resistant to some common insect pests.

Lawns can include a mix of many different plants and grasses.

- A lawn made up of a variety of grass species can tolerate a range of growing conditions and may be less susceptible to pest damage than a lawn of a single grass variety.
- Having a variety of plant types may also prevent pest problems from spreading to the whole lawn.

Your yard may be steep or be heavily shaded by trees or buildings. These special conditions require different types of grass or ground covers.

- Where conditions are not suitable for a lawn, try growing other ground cover plants more adapted to the area.

To Seed or to Sod

Sod

- provides an instant lawn
- is more expensive than seeding
- requires daily watering to ensure good establishment

The sod varieties available in your area may not necessarily be the best for your site conditions.



Photo: Dan4th Nicholas

If you decide to use sod

Get a few pointers from the supplier on how to lay down sod for best results. For large areas, it may be advantageous to have professionals lay the sod.

- Use a roller to press the sod for good sod-to-soil contact.
- Keep the new sod well-watered and don't walk on it while it's wet.

Seed

- contains a greater variety of grass species than sod
- initially needs to be watered more and for a longer time than sod

Grass started from seed can be more susceptible to competition from other plants in its first year than at any other time.

If you decide to use seed

Choose the best possible seed mixture based on your site assessment.

- Seed in mid-August to early September. Weeds grow slowly in the early fall and will compete less with the newly germinated grass seed.
- Follow the directions for your seed mix. Your site conditions will determine how much seed to use. Note that germination decreases as the seed gets older.
- Spread the seed, then lightly rake and roll it.
- Water lightly and frequently to maintain even moisture on the seeds in the top layer.
- Avoid creating puddles.

