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Overseeding Florida Lawns for Winter Color ¹

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In many parts of Florida, it is not possible to have an attractive, green lawn throughout the winter months due to low-temperature exposure. Permanent lawn grasses in North Florida (bahiagrass, bermudagrass, centipedegrass, St. Augustinegrass and zoysiagrass) go dormant in late fall or winter. These grasses grow very slowly and lose color in the fall, and turn completely brown with the first frost. Brown lawns throughout the winter are unattractive and weeds are easily seen, so a practice called “overseeding” is sometimes used to provide a green winter turf cover. Grasses used for overseeding will not survive in Florida’s warm weather; consequently, these grasses die out in the spring when warm weather returns and the warm-season grass comes out of dormancy. Overseeding is the practice of using a temporary grass that is seeded into the permanent lawn to provide winter color. While this practice is common on golf courses, athletic fields, and high-profile landscape areas, the principles also apply to homeowners who wish to have a green lawn year-round. It is important to remember, however, that this also entails year-round lawn maintenance.

Which Grass to Use

Several cool-season grasses can be used for overseeding, including ryegrass, bluegrass, bentgrass, and tall fescue. The best choice for overseeding for home lawns is ryegrass. Annual, intermediate and improved (perennial) ryegrasses are popular because of rapid seed germination, fast growth, adaptability, and reasonably low cost. Ryegrass is widely adapted, does well in either sun or shade, and tolerates close, frequent mowing. If seeded heavily and mowed closely, ryegrass can provide a very dense and beautiful lawn throughout the winter. By the time the ryegrass dies, the permanent lawn grass should be actively growing again and will provide color and cover the rest of the growing season. Of course, the ryegrass will have to be reseeded each fall to provide a green wintertime lawn.

Ryegrass for Winter Lawns

Timing - Establishment of winter ryegrass is a simple procedure. Seeding time varies from October to early November in North Florida to mid-November and early December in central Florida. It is best to wait until the daytime temperatures are consistently in the low- to mid-70°F range. If the seeds are

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planted during warmer periods, water stress and diseases may reduce the chance of seedling survival. In frost-free areas of South Florida, lawns generally do not go dormant, and overseeding is probably not needed for winter color.

Seedbed Preparation - The two most important steps in overseeding are proper seedbed preparation and proper watering. A seedbed where the overseeded grass contacts the soil

is necessary for optimum performance. To prepare the lawn for overseeding, the grass should first be raked thoroughly to remove all debris. Next, mow the lawn closely, catching all clippings, or rake the grass afterwards. The lawn may need to be cut more than once to reduce it to the desired height.

A lawn with heavy thatch produces an overseeded lawn with irregular patches. In this case, de-thatching with a power vertical mower or power rake (these can be rented) is advisable. Vertical mower blade spacing should be 3 inches for St. Augustinegrass and Bahiagrass, 1 to 2 inches for centipedegrass, and 1 inch for Bermudagrass and zoysiagrass. A final raking will remove additional material and loosen the soil somewhat so that the seed can come in contact with the soil.

The next step is seeding. There are no “magic” seeding rates. Rates listed in Table 1 will produce reasonably good color and density. If a heavy thatch layer exists, increase seeding rates by 25% to 50%. If available, buy fungicide-treated seed. For best coverage, use a mechanical seeder and sow half the seed as you walk in one direction and the remaining half by walking at right angles to the first. A very uniform stand can be established this way. After seeding, rake the ground with a stiff broom to ensure that the seed has gotten through the grass and is in contact with the soil.

Watering Watering is the last but most important step in establishing the winter lawn. Water should be applied lightly and carefully to the seeded lawn once or twice a day until the seeds have germinated. Watering should continue until seedlings are well established. Do not overwater, as this will wash seed away and encourage disease development. Once the plants are well established (e.g., mowed

several times), water on an as-needed basis to prevent wilting.

Maintenance of Winter Lawns

Once the winter lawn is established, it will require the same maintenance as the permanent lawn. This includes mowing, watering, fertilizing, and controlling pests. Begin mowing when the grass is tall enough to be cut (around 1 to 2 inches). Properly fertilized ryegrass grows very quickly, so weekly mowing will probably be required. Do not mow with a dull blade or the seedlings may be torn from the ground or develop a ragged appearance. Water as needed to keep the grass from wilting. Fertilization is needed to keep the ryegrass growing vigorously and to maintain a deep green color. To help prevent root burn, the first application should follow the second mowing. For the first application, apply 0.5 pound nitrogen per 1000 square feet, using a complete fertilizer such as 16-4-8 or 15-0-15. Thereafter, use a nitrogen fertilizer such as ammonium nitrate, ammonium sulfate, IBDU, or others monthly at 0.5 pound nitrogen per 1000 square feet.

Ryegrass is very susceptible to a disease called *Pythium* (damping off, cottony blight). The disease appears to be most severe on overwatered, overfertilized ryegrass, especially during warm, humid weather. Use of fungicide-treated seed, along with cultural practices such as seeding during the coolest months, proper watering and fertilizing, and appropriate fungicide applications, may reduce disease pressure. If *Pythium* occurs, a fungicide should be applied immediately because this disease can kill the entire winter lawn in twenty-four to forty-eight hours. For chemical disease control recommendations, refer to the section on disease problems.

Reestablishing Permanent Grass

To maintain good vigor in the permanent lawn grass, do not encourage the winter grass after temperatures warm up in the spring. The permanent lawn grass can be weakened by the highly

competitive ryegrass during this overlapping (transition) season of growth. Ryegrass will normally die out in late spring, but if the weather is cool and the lawn is watered frequently, it can be very persistent. To discourage the ryegrass, discontinue fertilization in February (South Florida) and March (North Florida). Water as infrequently as possible, but make sure the permanent lawn grass does not suffer excessively. Continue to mow the ryegrass as closely as possible each week. These practices tend to weaken the winter grass and facilitate a faster transition back to the permanent lawn grass. Once the permanent lawn grass has resumed growth, begin your regular lawn maintenance program.

Table 1. Overseeding Rates for Homelawns

Overseed Grass	Seeding rate in lbs/1000 sq. ft.
Bluegrass	3
Fescue	7
Ryegrass (annual)	10
Ryegrass (intermediate)	10
Ryegrass (perennial)	10-20