



GRASSES FOR THE INLAND NORTHWEST

There are many different types of grasses suitable for lawn areas in the Inland Northwest. Each thrives in different situations. To minimize lawn problems, choose the type of grass most suited for your site.

First, consider how big your lawn needs to be. Many people, even in arid summer climates like ours, assume that most of their property should be planted into lawn. Lawns require more water, fertilizer and maintenance than other plants. To cut back on water use and lawn chores, reduce the size of your lawn to whatever you and your family need for recreation. For other areas, there are many attractive alternatives to lawns including tree and shrub beds, groundcovers, and hard surfaces such as paving, brickwork, wood decks, mulched walkways, etc. There are also dryland grasses suitable for large unwatered areas. Some are discussed in this article.

Then, identify the conditions of the area you want planted in lawn. Is it full sun, shaded or some of each? Is it sloped so steeply that watering and mowing will be a problem? Are tree roots going to compete for water and nutrients? Some grass types are more suited to certain conditions than others.

Kentucky bluegrass

Kentucky bluegrasses do well in sunny areas. They are the most commonly planted lawn grasses and have many favorable characteristics. But they also require more water and fertilizer than other grasses. There are drought tolerant varieties such as Touchdown, Banff, Baron and Adelphi but these are less drought tolerant than the fescues described below. Bluegrass is slow to germinate but long-lived and it withstands heavy use and heat. If drought stressed it will lose its characteristic blue green color but will recover when adequate water is supplied. It is susceptible to Necrotic Ring Spot Disease and, if shaded and damp, powdery mildew. These negative traits are overcome when the seed is mixed with other kinds of grass, which is how most grass seed is sold.

Perennial ryegrass

Ryegrasses are extremely wear resistant and quick germinating. They make a good combination with Kentucky bluegrasses for sports fields and heavy use areas. Perennial ryegrass prefers full sun, has an attractive dark green color and is resistant to Necrotic Ring Spot Disease. Its primary drawback is that it is somewhat short-lived (2-3 years). Do not seed a lawn in perennial ryegrass alone.

There are five types of fine fescues: creeping, spreading, Chewings, hard and sheep fescue. Creeping and spreading fescues form a sod-like cover and are often included in mixes with bluegrass. Chewings, hard and sheep fescues are dense, bunching grasses. Sheep fescue is more clumpy and less attractive in lawns than other fescues, but it is the most drought tolerant of the fine fescues and is useful in dry, sandy or rocky soils or on slopes where low maintenance is important.

Turf-type tall fescue

Turf-type fescues have been selected from the coarser tall fescues that are used for forage. The newer cultivars developed for lawns are called “turf-type” tall fescues and are smaller, denser and darker green. They have narrower leaf blades than the standard tall fescue. They are drought resistant, wear resistant, shade tolerant and resistant to Necrotic Ring Spot. They require less water and fertilizer than all other grasses. There are dozens of cultivars of turf type tall fescues now available. Be sure, however, that they are identified as turf-type.

Native Dryland Grasses

Big bluegrass	Columbia needlegrass	Canby bluegrass
Bluebunch wheatgrass	Idaho fescue	Sheep fescue

These grass plants will survive in areas with no supplemental irrigation after they are established. They are bunchgrasses, meaning they grow in closely spaced clumps rather than spreading out into a sod-like cover. They will compete with weeds and protect the soil and they require little or no maintenance. Do not use them in areas that you want to be smooth, such as playfields.

Dryland grasses stay green as long as moisture is available in the soil. In typical Inland Northwest summers, this is generally until August. About this time, the grass produces a seed head and goes dormant, turning a straw color. They are not dead or dying, just conserving moisture to survive the hot, dry period. They will green up a little when fall rains come before they go dormant again for winter.

Seed dryland grasses in early spring so they can germinate and get established during the rainy weather. They are slow to establish the first year and it may appear that they are losing the battle to weeds, but don’t despair. In the second year they will take hold and out-compete the weeds.

For more information on dryland seed, contact your Conservation District or any of the following:

Grassland West	Clarkston, WA	(800) 582-2070
Plants of the Wild	Tekoa, WA	(509) 284-2848
Rainier Seed	Davenport, WA	(800) 828-8873
L & H Seeds	Connell, WA	(509) 234-4433
Seed Specialists	Hayden Lake, ID	(208) 762-8308
Sun Mountain Native Seeds	Spokane, WA	(509) 835-4967

Grasses not suitable for the Inland Northwest

bermuda	carpet	mondgrass
buffalo	centipede	St. Augustine’s zoysia grass

Although bentgrass will grow here, do not consider it for a lawn and do not use grass seed mixes containing it. Bentgrass is a low growing, shallow rooted grass that spreads along the ground. It is used on putting greens on golf courses and looks the way it does there because it is mowed and watered several times a week. It is a very high maintenance turf grass. In lawns, it turns yellow or brown at the first threat of drying out and when temperatures cool off.

SEEDING RATES FOR NEW LAWNS

Grass	Seeding Rate lb./1,000 sq. ft.
Kentucky bluegrass (blended cultivars)	3
Kentucky bluegrass (blended cultivars) plus creeping, Chewings or hard fescue	1.5 1.5
Kentucky bluegrass (blended cultivars) plus creeping, Chewings or hard fescue plus turftype perennial ryegrass	2 1 1-2
Turftype ryegrass plus creeping, Chewings or hard fescue	4 2
Creeping, Chewings or hard fescue	3
Turftype tall fescue	6-8

OVERSEEDING RATES FOR LAWN RENOVATION

Overseeding strengthens or reestablishes turfgrass stands in small bare areas, increases density of established turf, or infuses new cultivars or different types of grasses into established turf. Seeding rates per unit area cannot always be specified, but general recommendations are useful.

Grass	Seeding rate (lb./1,000 sq. ft.)
Turftype ryegrass	6
Turftype ryegrass plus creeping red, chewing or hard fescue	4 2
Kentucky bluegrass (blended cultivars)	2
Kentucky bluegrass (blended cultivars) plus creeping red, chewings or hard fescue	1 2
Turftype ryegrass plus Kentucky bluegrass	4 1.5

Compiled by Levi Strauss. For more information, contact Master Gardeners at (509) 477-2181.

Revised January 2005